

WESTPRO

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ENVIRONMENTAL PASSION

Drives Westpro Machinery



Environmental issues and concerns have rightfully taken centre stage for a number of years around the globe, and Westpro Machinery's ongoing commitment to caring for the earth isn't just lip service: this Canadian mineral processing technology company is putting its innovative knowledge to excellent use, with more than 34 years of invaluable experience and an unwavering dedication to leaving this planet cleaner for generations to come.

Written by Allison Dempsey

Specializing in the mining, wastewater and aggregate industries, Westpro Machinery both designs and manufactures process equipment for a variety of projects globally, along with providing other services such as installation supervision, commissioning, and process and equipment auditing. The company employs a highly trained team of chemical and mechanical engineers, metallurgists and plant designers with expertise in designing processes for zinc, gold, copper, silver, nickel, lithium, diamond and graphite production, among numerous others. ▶▶

- ▶ Westpro President John Atkinson started the company in 1985, but showed an interest in the industry at a much younger age.

"I got involved with processing in Grade 7 when I did a flotation separation of copper for a science fair," he says. "Unfortunately, the guy who made a volcano won."

Atkinson was also always interested in machinery, and following university, he started a business in Vancouver, buying and selling mineral processing plants. He also did extensive reconditioning of machinery before moving into remanufacturing – completely stripping down machinery and building it up using new components, before sending it out with a full warranty.

"We started to realize the industry was changing in a lot of ways with regards to used equipment," he says.

With the advent of the internet, customers could now go directly to a site to find machinery. Shop development also meant they were producing 60 to 80 percent new machinery, so Atkinson felt Westpro could go the extra step and start designing and manufacturing its own machinery, giving the company a better future.

"We ended up designing and manufacturing new, but we still did some reconditioning. Then we started to drop off the reconditioning and focused on new machinery," he says. "We did new machinery and developed a product line. Basically, our approach was to develop a very extensive line so we could provide a complete plant and process."

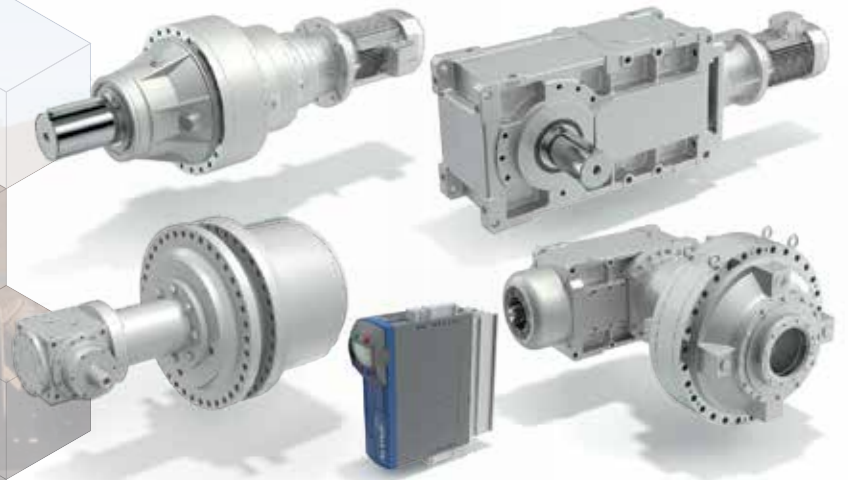
Atkinson ended up building one product at a time and supplying it, before expanding the product lines. Some of those lines developed by themselves, such as attrition scrubbers and thickeners, and Westpro went along with it, says Atkinson.

"The environmental side of the business is where Westpro hopes to make a difference now and into the future."

"These are very large thickeners, and we went turnkey on them," says Atkinson. "Some of these thickeners can have 500 to 800 tons of steel, with a very large tank and understructure. So we would build it and supply it, and also do the install and commission. We started to develop more into those, and that took us into tailings management."



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Everything progressed from there, he says, necessitating a move from Vancouver to Ontario for production requirements. Westpro now has production in Ontario, engineering in Vernon, BC, and a new office opening in Vancouver.

“My wife was involved in the very beginning, and then we had a family, and now I have some of my kids back in the business,” says Atkinson. Daughter Marisa is the Sales and Marketing Coordinator, and son Stephen is the Engineering Coordinator. “That gives us a whole new, fresh look.” Marisa is opening the office in Vancouver by herself, and pushing forward with new development through that location, Atkinson explains.

Growth is a continual process for Westpro, with a number of exciting plans in the works, including global expansion. “We have a global reach through the industry,” says Atkinson. A lot of Westpro’s machinery is sold globally. “What we want to do is establish offices in the U.S. and Mexico, where we do a lot of work.” Westpro also has plans for expansion in South America and Australia.

The company’s 35th anniversary is on the horizon as well, competing for attention with an upcoming trade show in Vancouver and MINExpo in Las Vegas in September, so celebrations ▶▶





► remain up in the air. “There are a number of things we want to look at doing for the employees,” shares Atkinson.

He places a heavy emphasis on the important role employees play in the daily functioning of Westpro, and how a family feel has been generated over the years. “You go through different stages, and right now it’s a family type business, which I never thought it would be,” he says. “At the Puslinch [Ontario] location we have a great group of people who all get along and have a good time. We really try to provide them with a good work environment and as much training as we can to keep them at a high level.”

Putting employees first is imperative for Atkinson, who believes a positive work environment creates quality workmanship and a sense of camaraderie. “Those are the sorts of things that matter,” he says. “You’ve got a lot of hardships that go on throughout the company and different challenges, and then you’re there in your shop and everybody’s really enjoying it, having a good laugh and putting out some really good quality machinery. So it feels like a big family.”

That level of comfort starts with the managers and trickles down to the employees, he says, and it makes a positive impact. “We put out good products and have a great relationship with our employees. We might be split up in locations, but we have a lot of good communication. One of the strong points of the company is from within – how everyone works together.”

That cooperation and collaboration allows Westpro to take on challenges presented by its customers, who often need complex projects completed quickly. According to Atkinson, about 90 percent of the machines the company designs are customized to client requirements, and Westpro is more than up to the challenge.

“Putting employees first is imperative.”

“Customers come to us with a project, we get everyone up to speed and everyone immediately gets to work. Having our own production allows us to take projects on and provide them in a very timely manner. Where other larger companies with more bureaucracy might take 10 months, we’re going to push that through in four months.”

It’s always an interesting challenge for the team, but one they’re set up for, he says. “That’s kind of our niche I think – customization and quick delivery. It’s never dull here, and there are always new challenges every day, that’s for sure.”

Westpro also works diligently with customers to provide the latest technology for their processes, including enduring, heavy duty machinery. “The beauty of our machinery is that everything lasts a long time with less maintenance,” and this is something customers appreciate. The team’s latest approach is reaching out more to customers who have been running

Westpro machines for a number of years, providing them with any available upgrades, improvements in instrumentation, monitoring and optimizing processes.

Westpro continues to set its standards high, recently supplying a turnkey thickener on time and under budget. "That was proof that the company could pull everything together – from my process people, to our production, to our project management, and finally back around to our process people doing the final commissioning and startup of the machine."

Atkinson has come to appreciate the fact that mineral processing is a true specialty, and one not many companies in Canada undertake, particularly in the mineral processing equipment field.

"We're a small Canadian company," he says. "There's a lot of development through Canada, but the specialty has been the processing. Our competition is very large companies out of Europe which have government ownership in them... We're a small guy, but we specialize in mineral processing in Canada."

Westpro is now moving into the environmental aspect of processing, which Atkinson deems a "perfect thing" for Westpro, a segue into the environmental side of mining and water treatment.

"It's a real movement forward, and without question, there's a big need for it," he says of employing environmentally friendly practices that protect the earth. "All these mines can absolutely operate this way; they just need to do it, and it's going to happen."

Atkinson is looking to add a tailing system to help eliminate tailing ponds, installing thickeners along with filters. "We're trying to work more on those sorts of things for the environment. From there we also have other areas we're involved in, which stemmed originally from mining, including water treatment systems and wastewater."

Those are just some of areas Westpro is looking forward to in the next number of years. This includes really looking at taking that mineral processing knowledge they've acquired and making improvements.

"That's our approach and our forward thinking in our company," he says. "How can we do things better in the future and have more control over anything that's discharged from mining? That's something we're very into now, using those processes. Things are changing and that comes from the younger generation in my family. It's very interesting and is moving us into an exciting area."

Using technology for new development and change is paramount for Westpro, as the company embraces any process that can make a positive difference.

"Anything that's coming out, you can scrub it and put out clean air," for example. "If you have a process and you need to clean the air, we have the wet scrubbers. These are all great areas of development."

Indeed, this environmental side of the business is where Westpro hopes to make a difference now and into the future – and it's a difference all companies can make if they choose to follow Westpro's lead.

"It's about making it clean," Atkinson says. "You do whatever you need to do, but any of your discharges need to be clean. It can be done! Do the process, do the mining, get the copper, get the gold; you need those things, but your discharges should be clean – and they can be."

According to Atkinson, that's the complete, holistic system Westpro is looking to develop: expertise in clean environmental solutions.

"That's our passion now. The technology is there, it just needs to be applied each time. You have to have some passion to stay in this business, and it's still there for us. We're having fun and it's always challenging." ■

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