

Entrepreneur gets hands dirty

Area man in the worm casting business

By GAY GRIESBACH
For the Daily News

SLINGER — Dirt Dynasty is building an empire one bucket of worm castings at a time.

Kris Sawall knew it was time for a change when he heard work at the Port of Milwaukee would be downsized at the same time his wife Sarah was about to have their first child.

When his brother Hardy talked to him about starting a worm farm, Kris' reaction was predictable.

"I laughed," he said.

The brothers were raised in Brookfield but Kris said they are country boys at heart. The Sawalls' parents had a vegetable garden and the brothers spent time at a farm near Cedar Grove that their grandfather Helmut bought after he retired.

After researching and purchasing a home on the north side of Slinger that had 13 acres and an insulated 70-by-30-foot pole barn in back, Kris embraced the idea.

That was about two and a half years ago.

Kris didn't invent the vermiculture system, but used a method developed by a Union Grove company that had been in the business for more than 30 years. After moving from Milwaukee to Slinger, he upgraded some equipment, including a sifter that separates worms and debris from the castings.

"It's honed down and very efficient," Kris said.

But that doesn't mean early efforts were successful.

Kris lost about 90 percent of his worms the first season. He consulted with other worm growers and the company where he bought his equipment, but ultimately he was left to find a combination of humidity

and temperature that would allow his worms to thrive.

It all starts with black organic peat that he measures and runs through a pulverizer; then he adds a measure of finely ground grain.

He puts about 250 worms into a 2-gallon bucket of the mix, using a combination of counting and weighing the critters to reach the optimum population.

Buckets are stacked in a climate-controlled section of the barn and in two weeks, the worms have eaten the feed and dirt and what is left are castings.

"The best part of using worm castings for fertilizer is the microorganisms," Kris said.

About half of the worm casting mass is comprised of beneficial bacteria. The castings also contain helpful protozoa, mold and fungus.

The worm casting industry is in its infancy in the Midwest, but large-scale vermicomposting is practiced in Canada, Italy, Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines. The product is also popular with marijuana growers in Colorado, Washington and California.

Kris said they initially planned to sell to larger operations but found the profit margins were tight.

When he found how expensive the castings were at area garden stores and outlets, his goals changed, focusing instead on home gardeners.

"If I can make it myself and get it straight to the gardeners, I can do it at a much more affordable price," Sawall said.

Melissa Grippe of West Bend has been gardening about five years. Last year she bought castings that she used in her newly installed raised-bed gardens.

"I would be out harvesting and saw so many worms in raised beds," Grippe said.

Kris screens castings to a uniform one-eighth inch, but said worm eggs will fall through. If the soil has



enough nutrients, worm hatchlings will spend the entire season laying eggs, producing fresh castings and naturally aerating to the soil.

"I know weather plays a part, but our tomatoes and peppers were really productive — everything was really good," Grippe said.

Zach Brown met his new neighbor before last year's gardening season and decided to perform a test with the castings.

"Normally we buy fish emulsion, but it's so expensive and really stinky and nasty," Brown said. "I did the test using just castings on two-thirds of the garden and did the rest the way I normally do."

Kris said other benefits of using castings are that they are odorless and do not burn plants.

While plants on the non-casting side were still

healthy, Brown, who has raised vegetable gardens for the past 10 years, said plants on the casting section were three to four times taller.

"Corn on the casting side was 6 or 7 feet tall. On the other side it was 3 or 4 feet (tall)," Brown said.

There was also an increase in yield.

"I had more tomatoes and peppers and they may have gone a little longer into the season," Brown said.

Brown prefers to use natural products on his garden, and Sawall said his brother Hardy recently submitted the final paperwork to become certified organic.

Dirt Dynasty sells worm castings for 50 cents per pound and there are price breaks for purchasing larger amounts. Call Kris at 414-531-1718 to arrange a pickup or check www.buywormcastings.com for information.



Gay Griesbach/For the Daily News
TOP: Livestock at Dirt Dynasty comes in the form of African night crawlers. **ABOVE:** Kris Sawall sorts out debris from a worm pan Sunday.

A move in the BP oil spill saga

Judge gives final approval of \$20B

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal judge gave his final approval Monday to an estimated \$20 billion settlement over BP's massive 2010 oil spill. Here's a look at some of the legal milestones since a deadly explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig killed 11 workers and led to millions of gallons of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico:

Record settlement

Last July, BP reached a record-setting \$20 billion settlement agreement with the federal government and five Gulf states. U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier in New Orleans gave his final approval to the deal on Monday. The agreement includes \$5.5 billion in Clean Water Act penalties and billions more to cover environmental damage. The Justice Department has called it the largest environmental settlement in U.S. history as well as the largest-ever civil settlement with a single entity.

Gross negligence

Barbier presided over a multi-phase trial for the spill litigation before last summer's settlement



In this June 3, 2010, file photo, a Brown Pelican sits on the beach at East Grand Terre Island on the Louisiana coast after being drenched in oil from the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. A federal judge in New Orleans granted final approval Monday to an estimated \$20 billion settlement, resolving years of litigation.

agreement resolved the bulk of the remaining civil claims against BP. The judge heard testimony from rig workers who survived the blast and from company executives who worked on the ill-fated drilling project off Louisiana's coast. Barbier set the stage for the settlement when he ruled BP acted with "gross negligence" in the disaster.

Criminal charges

A Justice Department criminal investigation resulted in charges against four mostly lower-ranking BP employees. Most of those cases largely fizzled. In February, a jury acquitted BP rig supervisor Robert Kaluza of a misdemeanor pollution charge. Another rig supervisor, Donald Vidrine, pleaded guilty to

the same charge after federal prosecutors abandoned more serious manslaughter charges against the two supervisors. Former BP executive David Rainey was acquitted of charges he manipulated spill-related calculations. Former BP engineer Kurt Mix was convicted of obstruction of justice for deleting a string of text messages, but a judge ordered a new trial amid allegations of juror misconduct. Mix ultimately pleaded guilty to a less serious charge and was sentenced to six months of probation.

Guilty plea

BP pleaded guilty in 2013 to manslaughter for the rig workers' deaths and agreed to pay \$4 billion in criminal fines and penalties.

What Costco shoppers should know before credit cards arrive

(TNS) — The days of the American Express Costco credit card are coming to an end.

American Express said last year its exclusive partnership with Costco would end in 2016.

Costco is partnering with Citigroup, and shoppers can expect to get new Visa co-branded cards — called Costco Anywhere cards — in May and early June. The new cards double as membership cards.

June 20 marks the date the warehouse club officially switches over from American Express to the new Visa cards, Citigroup said.

Here are things to know about the upcoming changeover:

■ What do customers need to do to make the switch? Not much. Existing Costco members don't need to apply for the new Costco Anywhere Visa card, which they will automatically receive in the mail. Members should keep using their American Express Costco cards through June 19 and then destroy them, Citigroup said. As of June 20 — when the new Visa cards start working — American Express Costco cards will automatically be canceled and won't work at any stores.

Citigroup said it will have

more information for customers who are interested in becoming Costco members on applying for the card in June.

■ How do the rewards stack up? Costco members can earn 4 percent cash back on up to \$7,000 spent on gas, as well as 3 percent on restaurants and eligible travel, 2 percent on Costco purchases and 1 percent on everything else. The card doesn't have an annual fee but shoppers will need to pay for a \$55 annual Costco membership.

The American Express cards provided 3 percent cash back on gas up to \$4,000 per year, 2 percent on restaurants and eligible travel and 1 percent on other purchases.

That makes the Visa card a "no-brainer" for existing members, but also one of the better cash back cards on the market that could be enticing for people who aren't currently Costco shoppers, said Sean McQuay, credit card expert for Nerdwallet. McQuay worked for Visa while it was negotiating with Costco but said he wasn't directly involved in the project.

According to McQuay, no card offers better cash back rates on gas, restaurants and travel, but customers who see the biggest chunk of their credit card bill going to

groceries may get more cash back with a different card.

Why the increased perks? Costco cardholders tend to be relatively affluent, use their credit cards frequently and make large purchases, making them desirable customers for a credit card company, McQuay said.

"It's safe to say Visa wanted to win this deal a lot," he said.

■ Do customers need the new card to shop at Costco? Costco members will be able to use any Visa card to shop at Costco after June 20 and don't have to get the Costco Anywhere Visa card. However, only the Costco Anywhere card will offer the cash back rewards described above.

■ Will getting a new card affect customers' credit scores? No — Citigroup said it will not pull a credit report when transferring customers' accounts.

■ What happens to rewards customers earned with American Express Costco cards? Customers won't lose cash back rewards earned on Costco American Express cards up to June 20 — they'll move to the new Visa cards, as will any outstanding balances, Citigroup said. Other American Express membership benefits won't transfer to the new cards, American Express said.

INBRIEF

Candy theft could mean 20 years-plus

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A Louisiana man accused of stuffing \$31 of candy bars in his pockets faces a possible sentence of 20 years to life in prison, prompting a judge to question whether the sentence was "over the top."

Orleans Parish prosecutors chose to charge Jacobia Grimes, 34, under a statute that boosts the alleged theft to a felony. The law applies to people who have been convicted of "theft of goods" at least twice. Grimes has five prior theft convictions, making him a "quad" offender.

Shooting range board blasts proposed Wisconsin rules

Ban would include liquor, tracers, automatic weapons

MADISON (AP) — The group that runs a shooting range in northern Wisconsin on Monday blasted proposed new rules for the facility and other state-owned ranges as unnecessary, saying the authors apparently never fired a gun and came up with the plan after watching action movies.

The Department of Natural Resources has pro-

posed sweeping rules for the nine ranges it owns around the state. The plan includes banning liquor, exploding targets, tracers and automatic weapons. The agency's board is slated to vote on the package April 13.

The Boulder Junction Shooting Range, a nonprofit organization, runs the DNR range in that northern Wisconsin town.

The group submitted comments to the board Monday saying the group already imposes rules suggested by the National Rifle Association. The new rules

amount to a unilateral, one-size-fits all approach that solves only people's perceptions of firearm dangers rather than real problems, the group said.

"The authors ... appear to be under the impression that all shooting ranges are the same," the group wrote. "It also appears that some of the authors or proponents have never fired a gun or gone to a range in their lives. Perhaps they are relying on reruns of 'Lethal Weapon' and 'Dirty Harry.'"

A DNR spokeswoman didn't immediately respond to an email Monday after-

noon seeking comment on the group's concerns. Agency officials have said, however, that they want to impose uniform rules on all the ranges because none exist.

Gun advocacy groups have given the rules a lukewarm reception at best, noting the package generally reflects rules at private shooting clubs but taking issue with the alcohol ban.

The BJSR said Monday that it already prohibits alcohol consumption on the range until after shooting is over, as per NRA guidelines. Banning it from the range

completely would drive members away and reduce revenues, the group warned.

The ban on exploding targets will be unenforceable, the group said. The targets can't start fires, don't leave debris and can add excitement to rifle matches, the comments said.

The group also argued that the rules allow police to fire tracer rounds so civilians should be able to use them, too.

If someone has a license for an automatic weapon, he or she should be allowed to shoot it, the group said.