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Traveling the world to thwart lightning

By Heather McWilliams July 19, 2013

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BOULDER — A Boulder-based company has struck it big in the world of international exports – by stopping lightning strikes.

Lightning Eliminators and Consultants Inc. provides lightning-prevention systems to industrial sites – such as oil and gas refineries, data centers, or pulp, paper and wood facilities – around the globe.

A traditional lightning rod draws lightning to a particular spot, then dissipates the energy through properly grounded rods and wires. Lightning Eliminators offers a dissipation array that reduces the charge on a protected structure, preventing lightning from striking in the first place, something particularly useful at oil refineries dotted with large storage tanks full of flammable materials.

“Those markets are our biggest ones since 1971,” when the company was founded, said executive vice president Peter Carpenter.

Buoyed by the growth in the oil and gas industry, Lightning Eliminators’ international sales grew by more than 50 percent from 2010 to 2012, with revenue jumping from \$1.5 million to \$4.2 million during the two-year period. International revenue for the first half of 2013 already has topped \$2.5 million, Carpenter said.

The growth drew recognition last spring, earning Lightning Eliminators an “E” award, given by the federal Department of Commerce to companies significantly increasing U.S. exports.

International business presents certain challenges. Security issues, understanding tariffs and regulations, properly timing deliveries to remote regions, procuring visas for workers and even cultural differences must be navigated for successful project completion, Carpenter said. Even the language barrier can cause problems, with the company offering technical information in five different tongues.



Lee Howard, left, Joe Lanzoni, center, and Peter Carpenter of Lightning Eliminators and Consultants Inc., display a variety of the Boulder-based company’s products that prevent damage from lightning strikes. Howard is holding a Spline Ball Ionizer, which transfers the charge of a lightning strike and also collects the part of the charge it can’t transfer. Buoyed by the growth in the oil and gas industry, Lightning Eliminators’ international sales grew by more than 50 percent from 2010 to 2012.

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Electrifying exports

Lightning Eliminators’ international sales of \$4.2 million accounted for 57.4 percent of revenue in 2012. The company exported to dozens of countries, primarily in lightning-prone regions. Its top 12 export countries for last year, from highest to lowest, were the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria, Turkey, Bangladesh, Singapore, Venezuela, Qatar, Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, Canada and Israel.

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As technology improved in the past few decades, command and operation systems have become increasingly vulnerable to lightning, too, because one strike can fry sensitive equipment and require a full-facility shutdown. If a lightning strike ignites a storage tank full of oil, the resulting exposing and fire can destroy surrounding equipment and then burn for days, further disrupting production.

Some companies choose to skip elaborate lightning-prevention systems such as those Lightning Eliminators offer, since local codes often require merely a lightning rod – at least until lightning strikes. Carpenter recently visited a new oil platform that had been struck by lightning three times in one night.

"They were not in full production," he said. "And it still ended up costing them almost a quarter of a million dollars."

The same platform when fully functional should produce \$4 million a day in product, Carpenter said, since even a short outage means a big hit to the bottom line.

Lightning Eliminators' systems run from a few thousand dollars to \$1 million, depending on location and what the client needs. It's a smart investment for clients interested in protecting delicate, expensive equipment or valuable product, its managers say, and offers excellent reliability as well.

"Our system has a success rate of better than 99 percent," said Lee Howard, the company's electrical engineering manager.

Lightning Eliminators employs 33 people, with seven in the engineering department and the rest working sales, management and administration.

Lightning Eliminators manufactures 100 percent of its product line in the United States, with 80 percent made in Colorado or Nebraska, something the company has gone to considerable trouble to ensure.

"We believe in America and in keeping American manufacturing in America," said Joe Lanzoni, vice president for operations. It's more than just the right thing to do, he said; domestic manufacturing allows the company to better control quality and nimbly adapt products for unusual applications. The company targets U.S. clients, too, with more than \$3 million in revenue from domestic sales.

"If you look at a lightning map of the United States, you can pretty much see where our business comes from," Carpenter said.

From Texas and the Gulf Coast to the Eastern seaboard, if warm, moist air creates thunderstorm conditions, Lightning Eliminators has business prospects. About 90 percent of its domestic work happens in Texas, Carpenter said, where many refineries and chemical plants set up shop. Texas has a long history with the oil and gas industry and easy access to a port for international shipping.

Lightning Eliminators provided local protection, too.

"We've done a variety of work in Colorado and protected several data centers for Federal Express and ... numerous oil and gas facilities, mostly on the Eastern Plains," Lanzoni said. It also created a \$700,000 protections system for Telluride's gondolas, which run almost year round and serve as part of the town's public transportation system.


"We were able to eliminate their lightning problem," Lanzoni said.

The company plans to continue growth by aggressively seeking new markets, he said, even though the company has worked repeatedly with global giants such as Exxon.

"We've spent a lot of effort chasing mostly the energy sector, and oil and gas have been very strong lately," he said. "As the rest of the world joins the First World, I think we're in a good position."

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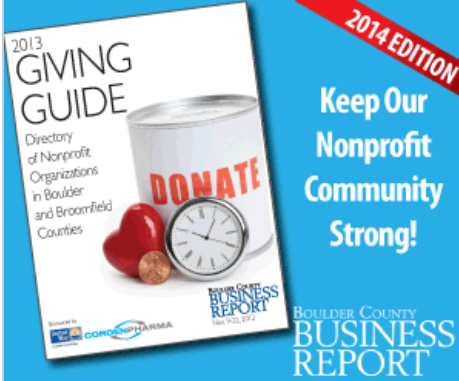
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