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“Waterville man develops new coating for packaging”

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WATERVILLE -- Tony Jabar went to the store three years ago to buy Scotchguard, a stain-resistant spray for upholstery, and was told it had been taken off the shelf --that it wasn't being sold anymore.

"The bells and whistles went off in my head," Jabar, a chemist, recalled.

For a large company such as 3M to discontinue a product that generated about \$300 million for the company's annual sales was a big deal, and Jabar knew it. The spray contained fluorinated chemicals -- the same chemicals used in coatings on paper wrappings for fast food such as burgers, french fries, pizza and microwave popcorn. The coating helps prevent oil and grease leakage. Concern about potential health effects of the chemicals, which also are used to coat pots, pans and skillets, prompted the Environmental Protection Agency to investigate. An EPA committee last year reported one fluorinated hydrocarbon in food packaging is a likely carcinogen.

Jabar for many years had researched corn protein and knew the protein could be used as a nontoxic, biodegradable grease-resistant coating, not harmful to either consumers or the environment. After he learned that the upholstery spray was removed from shelves, he began to think about developing an alternative to the fluorinated chemicals used in food packaging.

"I ran home and literally coated some coffee filters with it," Jabar said. "It was clear that there was something there. I demonstrated to myself that there was some functionality to it."

Jabar, 49, is owner of Cerealus Holdings, LLC, a company that develops renewable, sustainable, plant-based compounds to replace synthetic compounds. Two years ago, he teamed up with the University of Maine Process Development Center, got grants from the Maine Technology Institute and developed the nontoxic, biodegradable grease and oil-resistant coating for paper products. He has a patent pending on the product, which he calls "Holdout," and his goal is to be selling it by the end of the year.

"This works -- there's no doubt this works," Jabar said. "They've been trying to replace fluorocarbons for a long time and I'm confident that we're as close as anybody else out there -- if not further ahead."

He found a company in China that is extracting the protein from corn. Jabar, who went to China in April and will return in June, has worked with the company before in his capacity as a consultant to a Winslow company, Global Protein Products, for which he developed a biodegradable substance to preserve vegetables. The China company grows only biotech-free corn and will ship the coating to Maine, where it will be applied to paper and the packages and wrappings then cut for food companies, Jabar said.

"The product will actually be made here in Maine, in Auburn," he said. Joseph Migliaccio, development award program manager for Maine Technology Institute, said the private, nonprofit organization saw great promise in Jabar's idea and awarded him two seed grants

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to start the project. Jabar got \$10,000 initially from MTI and he matched it with \$16,000; then he got another grant for \$9,500, which he matched with \$12,932. MTI, based in Gardiner, then issued Jabar a development award for \$184,836 which really is a loan contingent on success of the product. In other words, if the product is successfully marketed, Jabar will pay MTI back for the loan; if it is not, he does not have to pay.

"MTI's role is to take a bigger risk than anyone else is willing to take, to lessen the risk for entrepreneurs," Migliaccio said Friday.

He said Jabar was given the award because he and University of Maine were an experienced team and the project had potential for environmental and job impact.

"So, it seemed like a great marriage of resources on a project that, if it came to fruition, would be very timely in the market place," Migliaccio said. He said he has great faith in Jabar's product. "I am confident at this point; it's a matter of finalizing his business model. The market is vast for this type of thing."

Michael Bilodeau, director of the Process Development Center at University of Maine, was not available Friday for comment.

A 1974 graduate of Waterville Senior High School, Jabar attended Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where he majored in biology and minored in chemistry. He taught chemistry, worked in research and development at Monsanto in St. Louis and later worked for National Starch Co. before becoming a product development consultant with a focus on bioplastics.

"I've always believed that nature provides us with all the answers we need -- we just have to look deeply enough and be persistent in finding things," Jabar said.