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Small Business of the Year: McGill Environmental of North Carolina Inc., Irishman has heap of success

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Noel Lyons' favorite recipe goes something like this: Blend chicken litter, spoiled milk, the rancid contents of cafeteria grease traps, drywall scraps, wood shavings, waste paper and waste-treatment-plant residue. Unleash microbes to gorge on the mix until molecules break down, generating heat that cooks it until it's germ-free.

The concoction might not sound appetizing, but Lyons and his company, McGill Environmental Systems of North Carolina Inc., expect it to generate \$7 million in revenue this year. The company, based in Harrells, uses the formula to turn about 200,000 tons of waste into compost each year.

It began production this year at its second site, an 115,000-square-foot plant in New Hill in Chatham County. It has a 90,000-square-foot plant at its Sampson County headquarters. It has about 100 customers - some supply the waste, some buy the compost. The company hopes to expand somewhere between Raleigh and Atlanta, possibly near Charlotte. That's all a long way from southwest Ireland, where Lyons, 42, grew up.

"I got my interest in environmental matters from my dad, growing up on a dairy farm," says Lyons, president of McGill Environmental. He earned degrees in agricultural science at Waterford Institute of Technology in Ireland in 1982 and in management at the Irish Management Institute in Dublin in 1984.

The next year, a mutual friend introduced him to James H. McGill, a fellow Irishman and Rutgers University-trained scientist. The two men initially collaborated on research into cleaning up hog waste. McGill, now 62, had contacts in the United States. Among them were officials of the N.C. Department of Agriculture. They viewed poor waste management as an impediment to growth in the state's poultry industry and introduced McGill and Lyons to executives of Rose Hill-based Nash Johnson & Sons Farms, a member of the House of Raeford Farms poultry co-op.

Nash Johnson offered McGill and Lyons the use of an old poultry house and 26 acres. The two men formed McGill Environmental in 1991. McGill, chief scientific officer, handled the research, experimenting with methods of composting, while Lyons focused on business. The company paid about \$26,000 to buy the Harrells site.

They continued to work on the compost process until they developed the right formula. The result was McGillLeprechaun compost, which is sold wholesale for about \$25 a ton to landscapers and others.

Lyons and McGill own equal shares of McGill Environmental of North Carolina and of a separate company, McGill Environmental of Ireland, where James McGill lives. The North Carolina company's main competition comes from landfills and municipal waste-treatment systems that get rid of waste residue by spraying it on land. "There's still a frightening amount of materials ending up in landfills, compared to other parts of the world, because landfill costs are relatively cheap here," Lyons says.

But he believes the company's future is assured. "The intensive activities modern man carries on are not going to go away. McGill allows us a way to continue in business and be compatible with a healthy planet."

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