

CLIENT STORY: MONARCH FLYWAY

Business is Blooming



REPORT DATE

➤ March 16, 2020

INDUSTRY

➤ Milkweed fiber textile

CONSULTING

- Market research
- Product development
- Exploring funding opportunities

RESULTS

➤ NDED prototype grant

CONSULTANTS: JOSH NICHOL-CADDY,
SARA BENNETT
COUNTY: KEITH
STATE SENATE DISTRICT: 47
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 3

Monarch butterfly habitats and the market for milkweed fiber and other by products are growing as a result of participation in the Nebraska Business Development Center (NBDC) intensive business development project in Ogallala.

In September 2018, NBDC consultants spent five days evaluating participating businesses in depth, which culminated in confidential reports to the owners detailing where they could improve their companies to full potential.

The project was funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) in partnership with Keith County Area Development (KCAD) and was offered at no cost to participating businesses, which included Natural Fibers Corporation of Ogallala.

Natural Fibers Corporation, now known as Monarch Flyway, is the brainchild of Herb Knudsen, company president, chemist and patent attorney, who acquired “the milkweed project” in 1987 when he was vice president of new ventures for Standard Oil of Ohio. “The original project and our work today involves taking an unknown, underdeveloped weed and harnessing its true potential,” says his daughter, Debbie Dekleva, Monarch Flyway general manager.

During their Keith County interactive session, the owners of Monarch Flyway worked with NBDC consultants Josh Nichol-Caddy and Sara Bennett to identify opportunities for the company. Among several recommendations were innovation and product development initiatives. Consultants suggested the Nebraska Department of Economic Development’s (NDED) prototype grant as a funding opportunity for developing Monarch Flyway’s nonwoven material into wider runs.

“Every milkweed fiber is hollow,” says Dekleva. “It traps warmth like the hair of a polar bear. It is also hypoallergenic and biodegradable. We have combined 80 percent milkweed and 20 percent of a synthetic binder into a new material that we believe gives us the opportunity to revolutionize the outdoor gear industry.”

Monarch Flyway was approved for NDED’s prototype grant to run a larger width material with commercial grade “feeders” to prove scalability of the project, with a goal width of 60 inches, Dekleva says.

Milkweed is the sole food source of monarch butterfly caterpillars. Monarchs migrate from Mexico through the United States to Canada and back every summer. As the world’s largest supplier of wild-crafted, sustainably harvested milkweed products, the company actively supports Monarch butterflies. Monarch Flyway protects wild milkweed patches and encourages people to grow more milkweed to fuel the migration.

Monarch Flyway’s first value-added business was Ogallala Comfort Company, established in 1988. The soft, silky milkweed fibers combine with down to create hypoallergenic, durable and comfortable sleeping products.

Other products include milkweed seed oil, which contains Omega 7 fatty acids that are normally found in the skin’s sebum but diminish with age, along with phosphorous, calcium, magnesium, zinc and antioxidants. The company’s milkweed balm is a synergistic blend of plant oils used to soothe muscles.

Dekleva says the company is continuing to work with Bennett and NBDC as it expands into new markets. “We would not be anywhere close to where we are today without Sara,” Dekleva says. “Her advice and the information she provided has put us on a path we didn’t know was available.”