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February 20, 2007 3:05 PM PST

## Now it's time for eco-friendly drywall

Posted by [Michael Kanellos](#)

SAN FRANCISCO--Drywall, cure thyself.

That's the idea behind EcoRock, an ecologically safer form of drywall coming from Serious Materials. Conventional drywall is made up of gypsum, and making it requires a lot of heating and mixing stages, said Serious CEO Kevin Surace in a conversation at the Cleantech Forum taking place in San Francisco.

"Drywall is the third largest producer of greenhouse gases among building materials. It's behind cement and steel," he said.

200 million tons of carbon dioxide gets injected in the atmosphere a year through drywall production, he added. In the U.S., 50 billion square feet of drywall get produced every year. California and a few other states have also put curbs on opening new gypsum processing facilities. (I do love the crazy facts you get at conferences like this.)

EcoRock is much simpler to manufacture. When the materials used to make EcoRock get mixed together, the chemical reaction takes place on its own. (A lot of chemical reactions take place this way--think of what happens when sodium hits water. Sparks fly without added heat.)

By eliminating heating stages, fossil fuel emissions are cut drastically.

EcoRock actually costs less to make than regular drywall, but the raw materials cost more. In the end, a 4x10-foot sheet of EcoRock drywall might sell for around \$20, while standard drywall can range in price from \$20 down to \$10. The price on EcoRock, however, will decline with mass production, while traditional drywall will likely go up with increases in fuel price.

EcoRock is scheduled to come out in the first quarter of 2008. The company is currently trying to raise \$30 million.

Serious is actually already profitable. It sells QuietRock, a sound-dampening line of sheetrock. The company has shipped 20 million square feet of the stuff, Surace said.

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## How green is your drywall?

By David Ehrlich

Published September 5, 2007 - 4:45am

We lean on it, hang our pictures from it, and generally depend on it for the finish construction of interior walls and ceilings in our homes and offices.

But do we know how drywall is made?

According to Kevin Surace, president and CEO of Sunnyvale, Calif.'s Serious Materials, the current manufacturing process produces 51 million tons of greenhouse gases, almost 1 percent of all U.S. energy consumption.

Serious Materials is out to change that. Founded in 2002 and backed by Rustic Canyon Partners, it already makes soundproofing drywall and windows, and plans to start making EcoRock drywall next year with a process that produces no carbon dioxide.

The company reportedly has a Series B round of \$40 million to \$50 million in financing underway.

Right now, Serious Materials is the only company with green drywall.



Kevin Surace, changing the face of construction

Surace, who said 6 percent of commercial structures are green this year, and that he sees that hitting 40 percent in the next three to four years, spoke with Cleantech.com about his company's EcoRock, thinking big on reducing CO<sub>2</sub>, and why Silicon Valley can build a better sheetrock.

**Where are the plants you're building?**

We have two plants today for our noise pollution product line, QuietRock. One is in Sunnyvale, Calif., one in Newark, Calif. The EcoRock plant is going into Stockton, Calif.

It's 240,000 square feet. It's a good size facility. Ultimately that plant will produce between 300 million and 500 million square feet of product annually.

### **So it's going to make a lot?**

It's actually not as much as you think. The drywall industry is upwards of 30 to 40 billion square feet in the U.S. alone. It's a drop in the bucket when you consider the size of the industry.

And that's the thing; these industries are so large, whether you're going after this, or glass, or metals, or concrete or whatever you're doing, these industries are so large you practically can't go after more than a small percentage. It's specifically targeted at the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and green building market today.

Drywall is one of those calcined products, like cements, that have to be cooked. Basically, it's calcined (a thermal treatment process) and then dried. The doing of that generates some 20 to 30 billion pounds or so of CO2 annually.

We're attacking that by developing a process using new material science that generates zero CO2, literally zero in the plant. So it's an absolute carbon-free process, as opposed to a lot of the products that we use.

Everywhere you look around you, everything has a carbon footprint, and we're trying to generate something that at least through it's manufacturing doesn't have any carbon footprint. It'll have to be transported to you, unfortunately. Can't solve them all, but we've got to click it off one thing at a time.

### **Can you talk about the process that you use to make this drywall?**

All I can tell you right now is that it's using some advanced material science, and the reduction in carbon footprint through manufacturing is significant. The energy used to make a standard sheet of drywall is 100,000 BTUs or more per sheet, 4x8, and we've developed a process that really takes, in essence, none.

A little bit of electricity and absolutely no natural gas. So there's no burning of fossil fuels, which there is in a normal drywall process.

### **Have you made any of this drywall?**

We make it all the time, but we only make it in the lab, in lab quantities. It's not on the market at this time, but it looks and smells and feels like gypsum drywall. You would not know the difference. You'd only know because I'm talking to you and telling you, but other than that, other than the logo on it, you wouldn't know the difference.

### **What about cost? Is it competitive with other drywall?**

Today the market for high LEED-point items is higher than commodity pricing, and so I would expect that this will follow that market pricing in terms of some increase above the cost of commodity low-cost drywall. The range of drywall pricing is very large, actually. You've got mold-resistant

products that are twice the price of the regular products, so there is a range.

The lowest cost material, I don't think that it will be the same price as that, and that's certainly not our intent. And it doesn't need to be, because the demand for this from our channel is huge. It's wonderful.

Almost one third of CO2 in this country comes from the manufacturing of goods, comes from industry. About one third industry, about one third building heat loss and cooling, and about one third transportation. I think when people wake up to that, they'll go "Okay, what can I buy that was manufactured in a way that doesn't generate CO2?" And it turns out that's hard to find today.

With awareness comes more market demand, but we already see the market demand in the commercial LEED spaces to be higher than we can meet.

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**How green is your drywall? - page 2 of 2**

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**Where are you marketing the EcoRock? Is this for buildings or homes?**

It'll be available in 1/2 inch and 5/8, fire rated, so it's for both commercial and residential, and will be available throughout North America. If the architect specs it or the designer specs it or the builder or the building owner specs it, the subcontractor won't see it as any different than regular drywall, they just hang it up.

We've got a channel of thousands of dealers that stock our products, and it took five years to build that channel, but that's crucial. You can't enter this industry and not have a channel. And you've got to have some deep pockets. You're bringing products to market in very, very, very, very large industries.

And in order to make a dent on the climate, frankly, you've got to go after big industries, that's the first thing. You need to change the way those industries work, or else you can't make a dent on things. And number two, you really have to have deep pockets because ultimately you have to build 20 or 30 plants.

That's how you begin to impact the environment in an absolutely appreciable way. Otherwise, if you talk about "I'm going to go make tables in a new way," maybe kitchen tables, that's nice, but the number of kitchen tables you could possibly make is just not going to impact the environment enough.

So you have to get the things that are billions of pounds of CO2 on an annual basis, and then you have to attack those billions of pounds, not by having one percent market share, but by having a large percent of market share.

I would certainly encourage other manufacturers to start thinking about this, and startup companies that want to go after this in material science have to think about these facts. They should be going after cement and glass and metal. Big things. Big. Items that generate billions and billions of pounds a year of CO2. That's how we can have an impact.

**Looking at your bio, there's a lot of software and technology in there, but no construction. How did you end up here?**

I entered the industry five years ago, and before that I was a tech guy, and most of the company is built with tech people, not of construction people. The primary reason for that is we're a Silicon Valley company, and I think when you want to make these kinds of strides, you really want to walk through walls, Silicon Valley does that best.

It does not take anything away from people who spent 20 or 30 years in this industry, which we respect and admire, but there's an awful lot that can be done, and has been, in many, many industries, in sort of the Silicon Valley mentality of "go make it happen."

I think it's difficult for older line manufacturers to execute in this way, because they have infrastructure to protect, and people's egos to protect, and all kinds of things.

A Silicon Valley company doesn't have that. You've got very smart people and very smart scientists that are told to go do things that have never been done before, and they giggle and laugh at you at first and then they go, "I get it, this is important to the environment, we have to do it." And they just do it, and that works.

**Will your factories be made with your own drywall?**

Well, we don't have any drywall in our facilities, so that's probably the best answer. We're going into existing, old, unused warehouses. We don't want to build anything, because by building something, we're also causing carbon to go into the atmosphere just from those materials. So to the extent that we can have no

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development. Simon Gall offers his perspective.

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materials, and essentially be brownfield, not greenfield, that's the best thing we can do. We reuse structures that haven't been used in a long time. A lot of people can't do that for their processes, but we can.



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