



# Fits Like a Glove

**Carla Bates' commitment to quality has paid off, enabling her to land a contract laundering safety apparel for a growing number of companies, including Honda's facility in Lincoln, Ala.**

BY MARTI WEBB SLAY

For many women, keeping up with the laundry is a chore, but for Carla Bates of Bates Enterprises in Childersburg, Ala., laundry has become a lucrative business that serves the automotive industry and other manufacturers.

Bates Enterprises launders safety apparel known in the industry as PPEs — Personal Protection Equipment — or gloves. The purchase and upkeep of PPEs can represent a significant investment for manufacturers, and Bates takes pride in helping her clients maintain their gloves while running a company that is not only profitable, but environmentally responsible as well.

Laundering gloves sounds deceptively simple, but when industrial oil, grease, paint, or ink is involved, the process is far more complicated and expensive than your usual weekly wash.

Interestingly enough, Bates came into this business via the more typical laundry service. “My family came from a laundering background,” she explains. “My grandfather came from Texas. He visited and realized there were no washing machines

around. The area was pretty populated at the time, and he ended up opening coin-operated laundries in Alex City and Childersburg. So I grew up being in the laundry business.”

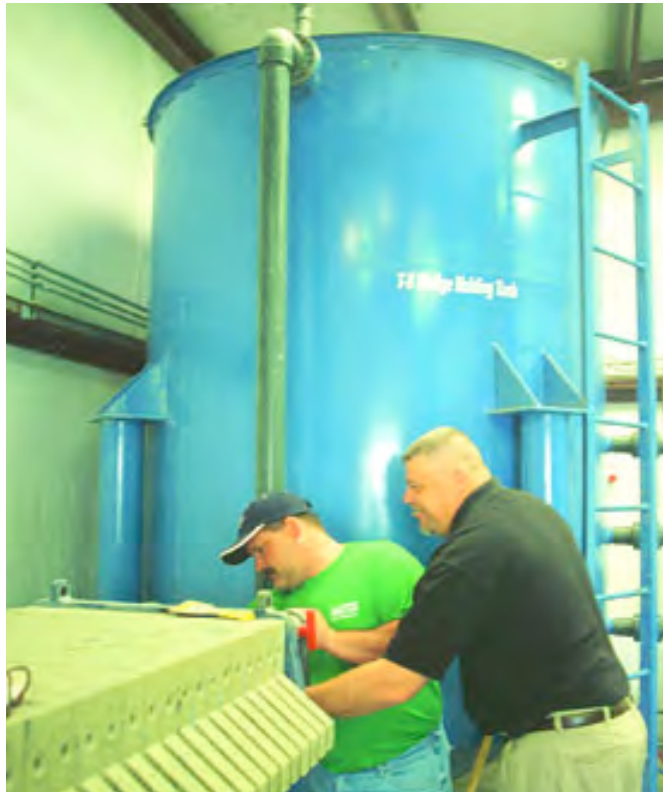
After graduating from college, where she studied marketing and business, Bates returned to the family business. She recognized an opportunity that was undeveloped, researched the idea thoroughly, and started Bates Enterprises in 1995.

Beginning with the steel industry and companies that manufactured air compressors and air conditioners, Bates was in position to market her services to the automotive industry as they moved into the state.

**S**till running a family-owned business, Bates works with her husband, and their teenage daughter works part time as well. “We make her separate gloves!” laughs Bates. It’s typical of her hands-on approach that family members do what’s needed, rather than enjoying a more illustrious position.

“I’ve got a great staff, people behind me that really help a lot,” she says. “When you surround yourself with really good people, then it makes things a lot easier on you. They all understand where we’re trying to go.”

Bates often makes the initial contact with a potential client, making sure she has done her research before that first meeting. “I have a couple of other people out helping me sell. In the past year or two I’ve started handing things off. We do a lot of research to find out what the customer wants beforehand. And then once we go in, we approach how we can help them. We ask the



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questions, ‘What are you looking for?’ ‘If you could have the perfect solution, tell me what that would be.’ That’s how we customize our programs, based on the information I’ve been able to collect before we go in.

“Then after we receive the business, we also try to train our drivers to handle things right on the spot,” she continues. “We try to educate as much as possible, all the way down from me to the people that are driving or out seeing the customer. There are certain accounts where our drivers are in there all the time, and they’re handling issues and taking care of problems right on the spot. We’re very, very customer oriented, and we try to jump through hoops to take care of customers. A lot of things we do are above and beyond. We really harp on quality,

too. We don’t want to send any products back that look bad.”

Her commitment to quality has paid off, enabling her to land a contract with Honda when it built a facility in Lincoln, Ala. “Not long after Honda first arrived in Alabama, Carla Bates came to us with big plans,” says Rick Schostek, senior vice president, Honda Manufacturing of Alabama. “Carla had done her homework on Honda and came to our purchasing manager one day with her plan to become a glove supplier. Carla’s plan included how she could save Honda almost 30 percent annually. That got the attention of Henry Turner, who is now manager of MRO purchasing at HMA. Through her research she knew our

new facility in Alabama would be a zero-landfill facility, meaning HMA’s operations would send nothing to a landfill. Carla’s presentation was totally green. She instructed Honda how her competitively priced industrial gloves could also help us meet our zero-landfill initiative.”

Bates is just as focused on being environmentally responsible with the water that’s left behind in her own plant after washing PPEs. Although environmental regulations are quite stringent, Bates strives to exceed requirements whenever possible. With a \$700,000 investment in state-of-the-art wastewater treatment equipment, she must design every process around each client and its unique combination of contaminants. “We are continually upgrading our plant and learning, because every company that we serve



**Laundering gloves (left) sounds simple, but when industrial oil, grease, paint, or ink are involved, the process is far more complicated and expensive than a household weekly wash.**

has different contaminants in their products,” she says.

“On a scale of 1-10, they are probably a 9 1/2 to a 10 as far as their goals to achieve environmental compliance,” says Mark Keehn, district manager of C.C.I Chemical Corporation, the firm that provides Bates chemicals for cleaning its water, and which consults with Bates about processes for each client. “They have the operation and the investment to accomplish that. They are doing far more; they are exceeding the bare minimum by a good bit, trying to be above what’s required.”

Bates believes that one secret of her success has been managed growth. “We’ve tried not to get too big too quick,” she says. “We want to make sure we can take care of our customer base we already have, because they’ve helped me to get where I’m at, and they’re the reason I’m here now. I’ve had a lot of customers that have taken an interest in trying to recommend me, and I’m very appreciative. I feel like the reason for that is that I’ve tried not to disappoint my customers.”

Slow, managed growth is particularly necessary in Bates’ business, since adding on a new client can often mean adding employees or shifts, or even changing how the work is done. “On

some accounts, we’ve actually had to change our whole process. We add people. It’s kind of like manufacturing, really, even though we’re service oriented. But we have to meet schedules. Say you get a big customer in, and they want it back within a certain time frame. We have to add machinery and things. Then that affects how many gallons of water we’re going to use in a day. We have to cost everything out just like a manufacturing company does.”

**B**ates Enterprises boasts clients from as far away as Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia. “We’ve even been up to Kentucky before,” she says.

Because the wastewater treatment equipment and chemicals are so expensive, they haven’t yet started branches to serve the customers who are farther away, but she has considered it. “We’re doing a lot of investigating to see where our market is going to go, and if we need to put another branch up, then we will definitely be looking into that.”

In the meantime, Bates is pleased to be “home” with her business. “I was born and raised here and went

to college here. Before I started the company I did travel and work for another company, and I’ve traveled all over the country. The business environment [in Alabama] has been exceptional. I think we’re on the forefront. It shows with all the automotive manufacturing companies that are locating here. It’s just been amazing. When you go around and you talk to other people, they’re talking about Alabama being the hot spot. Our leaders should be congratulated on that. I’m glad I’m here.”

For now, her growth plan still focuses on going the extra mile to provide her customers with outstanding service. “We document everything that we do for our customers. So when we go in and launder, we’re saving them quite a bit of money, and we try to document those usages. I don’t just go in and say what I’m going to do, we’re actually proving it to them. I didn’t want to just say ‘hey, we’re going to launder your gloves and bring them back to you.’ We want to help you manage your gloves, your PPE. We want to help you reduce your bottom line without compromising on quality or safety.

“We’re not the cheapest and we don’t claim to be,” she continues. “We try to be the best! You know the saying, you get what you pay for.”

Ultimately, whether it is in the area of customer service or being environmentally responsible, Bates credits her success to one thing: “Always trying to do what’s right. Whether you lose money on the deal or not, you have to do what’s right.” ■