

A GREAT FOUNDATION FOR MANUFACTURERS



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

AT BABINGTON TECHNOLOGY, FEEDING PEOPLE IS A GLOBAL INDUSTRY

By Lawrence Bivins

Bob Kaczorowski has been a satisfied customer of Babington Technology LLC since 2006. As program director for the Air National Guard's Disaster Relief Mobile Kitchen Trailer program, he oversees efforts to provide hot meals to large numbers of people adversely impacted by hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters. His unit owns 20 mobile kitchens made by Babington. "We can feed thousands of people in a very short time," Kaczoroski says.

As part of his work, Kaczoroski must ensure the Guard's relief personnel understand not just how to set up and cook with Babington's equipment but also maintain it properly and troubleshoot any problems that may occur in its use. He and his staff have received training in disassembling, diagnosing and repairing the state-of-the-art gear at Babington Technology's sprawling corporate campus in Rocky Mount. "The training there is very hands-on," he says.

Training is included in the cost of Babington's systems, innovative kitchens that can safely burn any liquid fuel source in a way that leaves no smoke or odor. What's more, training at Babington's site is convenient for Kaczoroski and his team, which is based at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C. "It's only a four-hour drive for us to Rocky Mount," he says.

The quality and reliability of Babington's products have attracted military buyers since the early 1990s. But the accessibility of the company's training facilities are icing on the cake. Its eight-acre site in Rocky Mount is less than two hours south of Fort Lee, Va., home of the U.S. Army's Quartermaster School. It is about the same distance from Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base and the U.S. Naval Air Station at Cherry Point, both of which also are Babington customers.

Babington Technology has operated in Rocky Mount since 2006. In addition to training, its 126,000-square-foot facility there houses design, manufacturing, shipping, tech support, financial management and other operations. The company also has offices in northern Virginia and Florida. "We have about 53 full-time employees, most of whom are in Rocky Mount," says Andy Babington, vice president and general manager of the company.

But location alone is not the primary reason Babington calls Rocky Mount home. The company had contracted with the site's previous occupant, FabX/Metals. FabX became available for acquisition just as Babington made the strategic decision to bring its manufacturing in house. "They had a great team of machinists, metal fabricators, welders and assemblers," in addition to the equipment and facilities the company needed, explains Babington. "We had tried to find that labor in our home state of Virginia, but couldn't."

The 2006 purchase of FabX fit neatly into Babington's long-range vision. "What was interesting to us was having more control over design, development, manufacturing and service all under one roof," says Babington, whose father developed the company's patented atomized burner technologies during his career as a NASA engineer. The acquisition "gave us a tremendous amount of control, especially control over costs," he says.

Babington's mobile kitchen systems are an efficient alternative to the cumbersome and expensive equipment the military had previously deployed in keeping troops fed. They also offer a strategic advantage. With "heat-on-the-move" capability, equipment is warmed up while still en route to forces and quickly deployed upon arrival. Troops are fed hot hearty meals in a matter of minutes -- not hours, which had been the case before. That means forces need not be held in place long, reducing vulnerability to enemy assault. Babington's technology is also useful in providing hot water and heating for tents in remote military environments and disaster-torn communities.

Moreover, there are private-sector applications for Babington's solutions. "We're going through a growth phase right now," says Babington. The company is working with the Small Business & Technology Development Center (SBTDC) at North Carolina State University on research and strategic planning. "We're looking to commercialize our product," he says. SBTDC provides advice and planning expertise on topics such as government procurement and exporting opportunities to North Carolina businesses at no cost.

Among Babington's current customers are international organizations and foreign governments. In 2015, for example, the company's stoves began feeding thousands in war-torn regions of Ethiopia as part of a partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Babington systems are cleaner, safer and environmentally friendlier than the wood- and dung-burning ovens previously used there. "Our company's mission is to be able to deliver any type of meal to any number of people anywhere in the world with the liquid fuel of their choice," Andy Babington says.

As the company grows its business and enters new markets, its Rocky Mount location will play a central role. Its site there contains ample room to expand, and eastern North Carolina's large pool of metalworking talent should support the company's growth plans. Proximity to the Research Triangle also is a key advantage, Babington says. "We employ engineers, product development managers, designers and administrative staff, some of whom commute from Raleigh." Also beneficial is the one-hour drive time to RDU International Airport, where its growing global customer base can conveniently fly in and out.

"The Rocky Mount community has always been tremendously supportive of us," says Babington. "We've never had to think about going anywhere else."



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