ABT reshuffles management, moves towards consolidation

By ANDREW OVERBECK

HENDERSON, Nev. — AgriBioTech Inc. (ABT) marked the completion of the acquisitions phase of its three-pronged business plan by completely reshuffling its upper management.

Citing a need to shift gears into integrating and consolidating the 34 companies that ABT acquired since 1995, the company’s board of directors decided in late February to replace Dr. Johnny Thomas, chairman and chief executive officer, Kent Schulze, president and chief operating officer, resigned in late March. While the board felt that Thomas and Schulze were good at mergers and acquisitions, they decided that former Lofts Seed president Richard Budd and others would be better suited to operate the company as it moved into consolidation.

Budd, who joined the board of directors when Lofts was taken over by ABT in January 1998, is now chairman and chief executive officer and is joined by a new team-based management group of four co-presidents who share senior responsibilities and consult on strategic planning and decision making.

Budd’s task is to make ABT, which many industry experts think grew too much too fast, financially solvent again. ABT has been tanking after announcing debt upward of $1.35 billion in February.

However, Budd remains undaunted. “With the changes we have made since assuming responsibility for ABT in March, we believe that we are on target to create a profitable, large seed company that will bring better performing turfgrass and forage seed products to the market,” said Budd.

The company expects that the current plan of consolidation and integration will allow ABT to pay off the subordinated convertible debt that was sold by the previous management by the end of the fiscal year ending June 30.

Under the consolidation, ABT will be cutting its workforce of 1,300 by 300 to 500 employees and reducing it’s 88 facilities to 50 to 60.

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PowerLight’s SolarCady gaining ground in Hawaii

By ANDREW OVERBECK

KOHALA COAST, Hawaii — Just months after installing the world’s largest resort-scale solar electric energy system on the hotel and golf course maintenance building roofs, the Mauna Lani Resort has rolled out solar-powered golf carts that utilize cutting-edge solar cell technology.

Berkeley, Calif.-based PowerLight Corp., which designed and installed the hotel and golf maintenance solar systems, has outfitted four of Mauna Lani’s golf carts with its SolarCady system.

Although solar powered cars are not an entirely new phenomenon, Mauna Lani is the first to use the SolarCady system which features improved technology and design.

“These are high efficiency solar cells that are similar to those used in satellites to power communication,” said Dan Shugar, product engineer and executive vice president of PowerLight.

“We have a charge controller that regulates voltage in a way that is compatible with the battery and this gives us maximum utilization,” said Shugar. “There are currently patents pending on the system’s design.”

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John Deere to build new utility vehicle complex

RICHMOND, Va. — In response to demand for its Gator line of utility vehicles, John Deere’s Worldwide Commercial & Consumer Equipment Division announced that it will build a new $30 million, 300,000-square-foot utility vehicle complex in southeast Virginia’s James City County.

Expected to employ more than 300 people when fully operational, the facility will include engineering and design for new products, manufacturing, sales and marketing functions.

The current line of Gators includes both two- and four-wheel drive, gas and diesel utility vehicles, and turf Gator and Trail Gator specialty vehicles.

According to Mark Rostvold, John Deere senior vice president, “This investment is a signal to our customers that John Deere is committed to the utility vehicle business.

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The robotic mower can be used in two ways. The superintendent first drives the unit around the perimeter of a fairway to record the corner points. From there, on-board computers automatically generate a sweep pattern to cover the area. The superintendent can then specify the spacing of the rows and the mower will "remember" the settings and follow the exact path each time.

The unit can also be programmed in a more specified manner. A superintendent can mow an entire fairway and program the mower to remember and follow his exact path from then on.

The system's five computers run a number of different functions allowing for a high degree of autonomy. One computer controls the motor, steering, throttle, brake and shifter. The second controls the GPS system which is integrated with an inertial navigation system allowing it to maintain its position when the unit is under trees or in a tunnel.

The third computer runs the detection system that can detect obstacles. From there, on-board computers automatically generate a sweep pattern to cover the area. The superintendent can then specify the spacing of the rows and the mower will "remember" the settings and follow the exact path each time.

The fourth computer runs a path planner. The fifth unit integrates all of the above functions using an autonomous control unit to drive the vehicle. Armstrong has mounted the unit, which is about half the size of a refrigerator, on the back of a Kawasaki Mule that pulls a control unit to drive the vehicle.

In the meantime, he plans to continue to tweak the unit in size and price. "We will eventually get it down to the size of a small cooler," said Armstrong. Additionally, Armstrong's first prototype cost $350,000, but he thinks that by the end of the year the cost will be around $50,000 and eventually down to around the $15,000 range.

"We envision a club that would have an automated team of these mowers that could go out at 4 a.m. and mow the whole golf course." -David Armstrong

Armstrong's next move is to attract companies like Toro and John Deere to integrate the robotic systems with existing fairway mower models.

"It is an amazing machine, if players are in front of it, it will stop and let them play through and then move on after they are gone." -David Armstrong, vehicle group manager, said that the company intends to break ground for the new complex within the next few weeks, with the plant on line by summer of 2000.

"The new plant will allow us to meet current and future demand for Gators and to design and manufacture new vehicle lines to respond to the needs of our customers," Larson said.

Deere/Utility

PowerLight

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According to Shugar, the SolarCady provides three distinct advantages. First, the car has increased range. While a standard electric car can maybe go for two rounds, the SolarCady can go for three and perhaps four rounds depending on the level of sunlight. "It's phenomenal," said Neil "Buster" Bustomante, general manager at the Mauna Lani Resort. "There are days where we will rent the car out and it will go for four rounds without using the battery at all."

Furthermore, re-charge times are cut in half, minimizing re-charge costs. The SolarCady also doubles the car's battery life. "Most courses rotate their cars every five years, but they wind up having to buy a battery after just two or three years," said Shugar. "With the SolarCady, they never have to buy new batteries."

At an average cost of $400 per battery, that would save Mauna Lani around $72,000 over a five year period. For that reason, Mauna Lani and PowerLight are currently working on a lease agreement to retro-fit all 180 of the resort's cars.

While PowerLight is working with golf car manufacturers to integrate SolarCady, it is currently installing the system strictly as a retro-fit option. The company leases the SolarCady for $14 to $24 a month.

PowerLight plans to install SolarCady in golf cars at a number of clubs across the U.S. by the end of the year.

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