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**Section:** BUSINESS

### Where there's a will there's a 'whey'

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Growing up on the family farm in Hardwick imbued Andrew Meyer with a love of farming and a commitment to Vermont agriculture. Today, the 37-year-old farmer and entrepreneur has taken that passion and created two companies that produce valued-added dairy-based products. Meyer found an innovative use for whey, a byproduct of cheese making. Whey protein is most often used as a food additive. But Meyer's company, Vermont **Natural Coatings** uses whey to make a water-based wood finish for floors and furniture that is far more environmentally friendly than finishes that rely heavily on solvents.

"We're able to replace volatile organic compounds ... so we're able to have a much safer product," said Meyer, whose other company, Vermont Soy, makes soy milk and tofu.

He said builders have shied away from water-based finishes, preferring those that are oil based. But Meyer said his clear sealer, or top coat, poly-whey floor finish and poly-whey furniture finish have overcome the shortcomings found in traditional water-based products.

"What we have with our product is a water-based product that is very durable, which the water-based market hasn't seen before," he said.

He added that his poly-whey products also spread evenly, cover a larger area, dry quickly and won't yellow.

The formula for the whey finish was developed at the University of Vermont by professor Mingruo Guo of the Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences. UVM filed for a patent and licensed the formula to Meyer for the North American market.

Meyer said his products have caught the attention of architects and builders.

"There's a lot of interest in green building specifications, certifications," he said, "and more builders, architects are focusing on making a healthier end product, a house, whatever they're product must be."

Vermont **Natural Coatings** products meet strict indoor air quality standards for volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. Meyer said while conventional water-based finishes have a strong odor that dissipates slowly, his poly-whey finish has almost no odor and dissipates quickly.

The volatile organic compounds content of the Hardwick company's products measure less than 180 grams per liter, far less than the average 250 grams per liter of conventional water-based finishes.

The company's products, which are made in Hardwick, are sold in stores in California and a couple of states in the Midwest. The company also sells its products on its Web site ([www.vermontnaturalcoatings.com](http://www.vermontnaturalcoatings.com)) but is concentrating on the New England market.

As far as cost, Meyer said two competitive products are far more expensive than his \$62 a gallon finish.

Vermont **Natural Coatings** employs five full- and part-time workers. Meyer said he expects to hire more workers as demand increases. Because he requires a very pure whey protein, he's buying whey from a company in Pennsylvania. What's needed, he said, is a local whey processing plant.

"What our goal is is really to work with local cheese makers in the Hardwick area to source our whey," he said.

In the future, he said the company is working on developing an exterior finish, a spray finish and an industrial finish for gym floors.

As someone who grew up on a dairy farm, Meyer said his interest in the sustainability of Vermont agriculture has never waned. He spent several years in Washington, working on farm policy for former U.S. Sen. James Jeffords. The experience convinced Meyer that the future of agriculture is in diversification.

"I felt if we were really going to make an impact on Vermont, we've got to start diversifying through small business," he said, "and my goal is to start some small businesses in the Hardwick area that are really based on using raw materials ... whether it's raw soybeans or whey or some other things that are grown here."

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