

Episode 35: Our Macon SBS Plant and VPP Certifications

Daniel Robbins: Here we are again for another episode of Above It All, a podcast dedicated to the roofing industry by Johns Manville. Today is a special day, not because we have two Daniels on the podcast, but because one of the Daniels is the plant manager for our Macon plant in Georgia. Daniel Day, how are you, sir?

Daniel Day: I'm doing great, how are you?

Daniel Robbins: I'm doing well. Thanks so much for being on the podcast. I wanted to talk about, before we get into the podcast, of course, you've worked at JM for some time now, I wanted to get your background before that and kind of what brought you to JM, what's your story there?

Daniel Day: Yeah, sure. So I've been with JM about seven and a half years now. So I started actually in the Macon Plant and then back in the Macon Plant, so a cool full circle there, but started in the Macon Plant as a process engineer based here in Macon, but I supported all of it, all of the bituminous plants. So Plattsburgh, New York, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and South Gate, California. And I would run more process improvement trials, qualifications, and things like that, so I got a chance to see the different plants, did that for about two and a half years, and then the opportunity to go manage production in our Bremen, Indiana facility came available and that was something I'd never done, and I thought it'd be a good experience and something to kind of broaden my career as well. So I took that opportunity, went and did that for also about two and a half years, and then the opportunity to come back to Macon came available as the plant manager. So both my wife and I are from Georgia, that's home for us, where we wanna be. So I raised probably both hands, my wife had hands and feet raised, so we made the trip back and I've been here as the plant manager now for also about two and a half years. So, two and a half years everywhere.

Daniel Robbins: Incredible. So I'm taking it that you probably are on the engineering side of things. Is that your general background?

Daniel Day: Yep, yep. I am a mechanical engineer by degree, went to a smaller engineering school here in Georgia. I knew it as Southern Poly. It's now Kennesaw State South it got swallowed up by a larger school, but yeah I'm a mechanical engineer by degree.

Daniel Robbins: That's very cool. So it sounds like JM is really giving an opportunity to just groom you in that whole practice of bituminous in a way, right, you've gotten to see the whole gamut of all the plans. That is so cool. So let's move on to your plant Macon or I should say our plant, as we work for Johns Manville, but Macon... What does it produce?

Daniel Day: So we produce bituminous, and that is a cool term for asphalt roofing, and under the bituminous umbrella, we've got SBS, APP, and then we make some self-adhere products as well. And so the product family as a whole, we've got these different groups because they need to operate in a certain climate. So asphalt in itself is a water-proofing agent. Back in the old times, they'd do tar and paper and that was your roof, but with a modified system, what we do is we take asphalt and many times it's a certain asphalt and then we modify that even further with a particular polymer to get it to operate in a broader temperature range or a specific temperature range, and what have you, so it just kinda gives us a little bit of ability to modify that for our customer applications.

Daniel Robbins: So, pardon me if I got this wrong. So per sometimes climates that we're shipping to, you guys might adjust the product so that it can accommodate to that type of temperature, humidity, all of that stuff?

Daniel Day: No, we're not necessarily modifying on the fly, they would order the APP or SBS depending on which climate they have.

Daniel Robbins: Gotcha. Okay, so sure. The product is there to help gear towards that specific job and project in that location. Very cool. What region in the United States does your plant service?

Daniel Day: Yeah, good question. So being primarily in the South East, that's what we service, but our products go to Canada, we have some stuff go out to California, we're shipping out to Arizona for some large projects up into Chicago. So you could really see some Macon manufactured might be really anywhere in the Continental US.

Daniel Robbins: That's very cool. So I guess when you're working on that line and you're making one product, is it a huge process to change over to a new product such as APP to SBS, SA or something like that?

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Daniel Day: It may depend on who you ask on what day, but I would say overall, no, it's not that difficult. We run just a single thread path, so our line is probably more catered to APP by just nature, that was what a majority of the business was early on before it was officially Johns Manville, and then we throw on the SBS in. So we run a single thread path, so when we're changing over from APP to SBS or vice versa or even going to self-adhered, it's still the same thread path, we just may change some math. Probably the biggest complexity is timing, because we make everything by batch and our batch sizes are approximately 30,000 pounds, so you've really gotta be on your game when you go from one to another to make sure that you're timing that change over appropriately with the right mix, the right math, the right surfacing and getting all of that timed right to have that final product.

Daniel Robbins: So I guess working a week's worth of manufacturing for you guys, how much product can you guys crank out, what's the highest capacity you could?

Daniel Day: Our fastest product is probably DynaBase. That's an SBS base sheet; it's a 1 1/2 square, and if we're running that full tilt, we can do probably 4000 to 4500 squares per day. Yeah, so good bit of material. I mean, we're... We make... I'll give it to you in terms of pounds; so we make approximately eight or nine batches a day, and if those are 30,000 pounds, if I can do my math right, that's about 240,000 pounds of mix through the plant in a day.

Daniel Robbins: Wow. That's incredible. So, do we get... I guess it seems like sometimes we're getting these specialty orders for this product, because sometimes the jobs just require it to. Are we making batch orders, like you said? Is it sometimes even made to order and then sent on the fly kind of a thing?

Daniel Day: Yeah, yeah. So, a lot of our base sheets, we... We'll keep in stock the large moving items. And then many of our cap sheets, which would be the second layer of the roofing system, we're gonna make a lot of that to order, because that's where it gets a little bit more intricate with what the customer may be wanting. Maybe they want a red roof, or a green roof, or maybe even a reflective roof, which is an offering that we have. Historically... Yeah, yeah. So, that's a pretty cool product that we've been making for a couple of years. So we've had a CR line for a long time, and CR stands for Cool Roof. Historically, that was a painted product, which it was good for what it was, but there's a lot of, I'll say, more intricacies around how you handle that product at the end user. So, while that was in the market place, the team was working on a granulated solution to where the granules themselves are actually reflective. And so we've had that running for a couple of years now, but that is absolutely one we make to order. We wanna make sure that when the customer receives that, it's as bright white as it can possibly be and really presents well.

Daniel Robbins: Wow. I mean, I love that too, though. I mean, just getting fresh cap sheet off the line, made to order, there's something quality... I feel like in people's minds, there's something that people would appreciate about that. So, that's very cool. I wanna move on to another topic for you guys: VPP certification. I know that it's something that you put a lot of merit into, and so I wanted to hear what the culture is around that and its relation to the plant currently.

Daniel Day: Yeah. So VPP stands for Voluntary Protection Program, and that is an offering through OSHA, which is the Occupational Safety and Health Association. But many years ago, the Macon plant, and this was well before my time, made the decision to apply for a VPP certification. And that is a very, very healthy and just long drawn-out process where it's really a lot around your documentation, your safety program as a whole, the things that you have that go in that make that up. So they did get certified, and then, since my tenure here, I was actually part of a three-year recertification, and then most recently, we had a five-year recertification, but basically, what VPP entails from the user dashboard side is we actually invite OSHA to come in and audit our facility. And when I tell folks that, many of them look at me like I've got two heads or something like that. They're like, "What? You invite them to come in?" But it's really a cool partnership.

Daniel Day: So, they come in; it's typically two government officials and then what they call SGEs, which are special government employees, and that would be somebody who's in the industry who's gone through the proper training. In fact, my safety person right now is an SGE. But it would be three other people from the industry that would come in. They've all got safety and health background, and they go through all of our documentation, they go through the process, they walk around the facility, really looking at everything, and anything that they find, as long as we correct that while they're here, it's not a problem. So, we really... We kinda get the luxury of having a free audit, if you will, which helps us get better and then ultimately helps the employees.

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Daniel Robbins: It's almost like a consulting on it, where they're providing that opportunity for you. It's... I don't even... You say OSHA at first, but it's almost like this stand-off relationship like, "Oh no, I'm gonna potentially have to deal with having to pass this test and make sure everything is in line," but if it's there and it's like a consulting experience, and like you said, you guys get to grow from it, that's huge. That's massive.

Daniel Day: Yeah, the five-year recertification... Actually, we had that during 2020. We had all our COVID protocols and everything like that, but we still had them to come in. But it was a really great experience. I mean, they were just very glad to be in the facility, and... You know, we took things away from it, they took things away from it, so it really is a good partnership. And at the end of the day, it makes us safer, and that's... I mean, that's the JM experience to our employees, right?

Daniel Robbins: Now, do you think OSHA really recommends VPP certification type of relationships with companies our size? Or, I guess, in our industry as well?

Daniel Day: I would have to say, from my experience, yes. And then the other thing I was gonna add around that is we have actually been... We've had folks reach out to us and say, "Hey, you know, the VPP Region Five coordinator has recommended Johns Manville as a partner for mentorship around VPP, and it would be from a local industry who is thinking about going after a VPP certification." So I would say based on those two pieces, yeah, absolutely. I think they recommend it for any company company.

Daniel Robbins: Very cool. Very cool. So, I know too, when we were talking about this last, you mentioned that one person does... Like, those people that would come to audit the site, they're from the industry, like other companies, or are they working for OSHA?

Daniel Day: So, a little bit of both, you have two OSHA employees, and then... Like in our case, we had five people, so it was two OSHA and then three from local industry, so they are from other Johns Manvilles around the local area.

Daniel Robbins: Gotcha. Very cool. Well, with that, we have gone over a little bit our time limit, but thank you so much for being on the podcast. I mean, we got the whole run, right? We got... What an amazing plant you have set up, the capacity. And I know for people that do use SBS, I mean, it is an incredible product, what you guys are making at Macon. And then of course, the safety culture aspect of it. I don't think we've had a plant manager come on and really be able to tell us about this VPP certification before, so thank you so much.

Daniel Day: Yeah, thanks for the opportunity Daniel.

Daniel Robbins: Awesome. Well, with that, we will close out.

Daniel Day: Alright, see you.

Daniel Robbins: Alright.