



Steve Metzler/Star

ABOVE: Marko Gomez dips molds for "desk heads" at Southwest Latex in Marlow.

INSET: A batch of bait pods fills a rack at Southwest Latex before being shipped to a Guthrie business for assembly into the final product, Magic Bait.

## In-state partnership helps Marlow company grow

By STEVE METZLER  
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MARLOW — Tired of the high costs of living and doing business in southern California, Tony and Elizabeth Skahill looked to Oklahoma and are now making a new future for their family and business in Marlow.

The Skahills own and operate Southwest Latex, a good example of the kind of small business that is a powerful driver of the state's economy. It's also an example of how a business can take advantage of Internet technology to set up shop in small town Oklahoma and still do business in places from Pinellas Park, Fla., to Poulsbo, Wash.

Southwest Latex is a partner in the manufacturing of products ranging from synthetic rubber seat cushions for people in wheelchairs to squeezable "desk heads" or "stress balls" found in offices across the country. The company uses a custom "dip molding" process to turn out items made of

latex, plastisol, neoprene and other compounds, Tony Skahill said.

In the last half year or so, Southwest Latex has contracted with another small business in Oklahoma, Guthrie-based Magic Bait, to produce soft but durable latex "bait pods" made to hold bait squeezed from a tube that catfish find hard to resist. The relationship has been as good for both companies as it's been bad for the fish.

"The whole idea (of the bait pod, which after it is molded is sent to Guthrie to be punched with a hole to take the gooey, squeezed-in bait and a hook) is that you don't lose the bait," Skahill said. "We started off with an initial order of 100,000. After that we're getting monthly orders of about 40,000 pieces."

Scotty Hampton, co-owner of Magic Bait, which employs 16 in Guthrie, said his business, like Southwest Latex, is family-owned, and was glad to find a company in Oklahoma that could make the pods it needed.

"We looked online on the

Thomas Register website, under dip molding. We explained our needs, later sent a company representative to Marlow to see the operation and better explain what we were looking to produce," he said. "Southwest Latex has been easy to work with and exceeded the norm in service. We are very pleased with our relationship and always glad to keep as much business in our state as possible."

Southwest Latex started out in Upland, Calif., in 2004. Skahill said he got into the business with his dad, Dutch. A visit to Oklahoma, where his brother, Joe, lives, changed everything.

Skahill said he was tired of the highways in California, the higher living expenses, higher utilities and higher taxes. In Marlow, the Skahills — Tony, wife Elizabeth, who keeps the books and does other administration for Southwest Latex, and children Aaron, Marilyn and Kenny — have found a lifestyle they wanted, friends and

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Steve Metzner/Star

Tony and Elizabeth Skahill moved their business, Southwest Latex, to Marlow from California in 2006.

## LATEX: Assistance available for businesses in region

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neighbors they enjoy and business advantages.

"Oklahoma is very business friendly," Elizabeth Skahill said.

The state has even offered geographic advantages.

"Actually, it's better because we're in the center of the country," Tony Skahill said. "Most of our raw material comes from Ohio."

Southwest Latex retains one employee in California who handles sales, marketing and website management, and Dutch Skahill, who still lives there, is a co-owner.

But the company has grown to include eight employees over the last two years, five full time and three part time, and most of them reside in Marlow.

Elizabeth Skahill said the family's hope is for the business to grow and create more local jobs. Toward that end, both she and her husband have taken advantage of free services for small businesses provided by the Great Plains Technology Center in Lawton and Red River Technology Center in Duncan, getting tips, for example, on things like accounting and managing human resources. They have received free help, too,

from the Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance, which arranged for some industrial engineering students from the University of Oklahoma to visit Marlow and offer input on how Southwest Latex might improve productivity and gear up for potential growth in the future.

"We're growing with the business," Elizabeth Skahill said. "I would really encourage businesses like us to take advantage of resources like these."

Jackie Jacobi, who works in business development at the Duncan tech center, said the Skahills have been involved with the Red River program for two years, focusing on business and financial management. She said people who own or aspire to own small businesses can definitely benefit from her program, which stresses things like providing leadership, managing money and resources and knowing the rules of entrepreneurship.

Not only do small businesses and communities like Marlow benefit from such programs, so does the state of Oklahoma, she said. Small businesses create 96 percent of all jobs in the state.



# Small business means big business for state

By STEVE METZER

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Headlines related to the Great Recession have generally been dismal, but consider this one: "New business startups reach 15-year high."

According to the Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity, about 565,000 new businesses were launched in the United States in 2010, matching the total for startups in 2009 and keeping the pace at its highest level since 1995.

While it can't be denied that the recession also has killed businesses by the hundreds of thousands, as reported by the U.S. Small Business Administration, evidence of the strong entrepreneurial spirit of Americans has to be encouraging to people like Jackie Jacobi, a career and business coach who heads up business development services at Duncan's Red River Technology Center. An even better headline, she reports, might be that in 2009 Oklahoma tied with Montana for having the highest rate of entrepreneurial activity in the nation.

The reason that's so important is that, according to the Oklahoma Department of Commerce:

- Small businesses represent the bulk of Oklahoma's

## Small business facts

- There are 124,027 Oklahomans who work for themselves, making the self-employed the state's largest employer.

- About one in nine U.S. workers are self-employed.

— From Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin and the U.S. Department of Labor

economy — 97 percent of the state's employers.

- Small businesses create 75 percent of all new jobs.

- 53 percent all small businesses are home-based.

Because of the state's vital interest in the success of small businesses, it offers a lot of help — and lot of it for free — to people who are their own bosses. At the Duncan tech center, for example, training workshops and individual consultations can help people in areas including business plan development, personal and professional development, networking, money management and investment, business record-keeping, understanding insurance, tax planning, and estate planning.

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The Oklahoma Department of Commerce offers an Internet portal for entrepreneurs at [www.OKStart-Up.com](http://www.OKStart-Up.com).