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The Mover

Mascoma CEO Brady sees biofuels biz changing global carbon footprint

By Marc Songini, Special to Mass High Tech

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William Brady
CEO of Mascoma Corp.

Education: Bachelor's degree in chemistry, University of Scranton; MBA, Fairleigh Dickinson University

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Guiding a startup to full-scale production capacity is like running a marathon — it requires patience and a long-term view, like a runner focusing on one road marker and then the next, says William Brady, the new CEO of biofuels company Mascoma Corp.

Brady should know: The three-time veteran of the Boston Marathon likens running a fledgling business to running a grueling road race: You have to keep the goal in mind, even while facing the "little Heartbreak Hills," said Brady. "I often say that when I run a marathon, it's one telephone pole at a time."

Brady was named CEO of Mascoma, in Lebanon, N.H., last month. His goal is to bring a long-distance runner's patience to the job. The company's goal? To reduce the cost of cellulosic ethanol development, create commercial biofuel partnerships and bring Mascoma's proprietary manufacturing processes to the global market. He sees the company's technology as a game changer that may someday cut the world's carbon footprint and even slow global warming. "It's a big vision, and that's the reason I came here," he said. "I wanted to work

on one of the defining issues of our generation, which is climate change. Number two, I wanted to build one of the companies of the next decade. So that's why I'm here."

Brady, 48, is planning to tap into his experience in large-scale chemical manufacturing processes, derived from 23 years working at Boston-based chemicals manufacturer Cabot Corp. While there, he worked as executive vice president and general manager of several divisions, including the inkjet pigment chemical and global rubber businesses. Brady ran some divisions all the way from development through manufacturing and sales. He also forged alliances with some of Cabot's larger customers.

Brady said his experience with Cabot and future work with Mascoma are well matched. "I've gone through the pains of a startup, with the scale-up issues to the difficult commercialization issues and selecting the market segments we'll go after."

Although he is still in the early stages of strategic planning, one of the major projects ahead is to bring Mascoma's Rome, N.Y. -based pilot manufacturing facility on line, and raising money has been "challenging." (A Mascoma subsidiary, Frontier Renewable Resources LLC, is also developing a commercial-scale production plant in Kinross Township, Mich.) "We're trying to figure out ways to take the next step in this economy and not losing momentum," he said.

With that in mind, over the next year, Brady's plans include working to secure funding from venture capitalists as well as state and federal governments, all of which have already contributed to a couple of financing rounds. Financing is a bit more difficult than it has been, he noted. "I see biofuels going through a cycle quite natural for new technologies," Brady said. "At some point, the world says, 'Good, but what does it take to make it real?'"

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Brady was quick to point out that Mascoma is looking to overcome some of ethanol's perceived shortcomings, such as taking materials from foodstock. Mascoma seeks only to convert nonedible plant materials into fuel, Brady said. Also, its processes involve converting the biomass — corn stalks, woods, grasses — into ethanol without needing to add costly enzymes and bacteria. "Ours is a consolidated bioprocessing technology that does the conversion to cellulosic ethanol in one step," he said. "It's a huge efficiency factor that ultimately will manifest itself in lower costs as we start to build industry-scale plants."

Brady always had a love of science and math. He holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania and an MBA from Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. While Brady now calls Boston home, he is a transplant from New York and remains a "full-blooded Yankees fan." He has four children, which helps underscore his personal commitment to the cause. "At some point, we're going to have to answer the question from our grandchildren: 'What were you guys thinking (environmentally)?' I want to answer the question, and have my grandkids say: 'Wow, you had to get that done, and it was really hard.'"

Marc Songini is a freelance writer in Mansfield.

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