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Growing ever greener

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LAS VEGAS — Pat Ferguson spent 24 years in the medical field producing products like bio-absorbable materials, i.e., sutures that don't require removal.

John Oliverio spent 10 years in the hot tub business before making a 1997 New Year's Eve resolution to change his life.

Both men brought products to the 2008 ICAST Show that represent major steps in the continued greening of the sportfishing industry. And both products — Ferguson's fishing line that biodegrades in five years, and Oliverio's hydraulic fluid made from seed and vegetable oils — are such major steps they can give even a cynic hope that this planet's environment can be preserved.

"The technology is out there to design these things," Ferguson said. "It's just going to take some time."

If you spend any time in or along our nation's waters, whether fishing or simply hiking, you know the problem that is discarded fishing line. Part of it is simply the unsightliness of litter in nature. Part of it is much more invasive and destructive, like the sight of a shorebird with line tangled around its wing or leg.

If you haven't seen the problem, here's a fact for you: Between 2000 and 2004, one study documented 166 Florida sea turtles that were found entangled in fishing line.

Since petroleum-based monofilament line is estimated to remain intact for about 600 years, it can accurately be stated that virtually every piece of lost or discarded fishing line continues to exist somewhere on Earth.

A promotional package of Ferguson's Bioline claims to contain a five-year-old sample of the line. When you open the package, there's nothing inside.

Bioline's proprietary "biofilament" claims to offer many of the benefits of traditional monofilament and fluorocarbon fishing lines — fluorocarbon, by the way, lasts even longer than mono's 600 years — with the added benefit of biodegrading into a minimal amount of carbon dioxide when exposed to naturally occurring elements for five years.

"Bioline's development has followed a similar path to most groundbreaking technologies," said Ferguson, the president of the company, which is based in Portland, Ore. "What began as an expensive niche technology in the medical industry has decreased in cost with market expansion and growth in materials supply."

Engineered nature friendly — BioLine will biodegrade and disappear from lakes and streams within 3 to 5 years versus the 600-year life cycle of standard monofilament line.

As a result, the angler now has a competitively-priced product available that comes with a decidedly green footprint, unlike anything else on the market. And most importantly, it doesn't require you to sacrifice much of anything in the way you'd normally use traditional monofilament or fluorocarbon fishing line.

Here's the main sacrifice with Bioline: Once it's on your reel, you need to replace it within 10 to 12 months without suffering any noticeable degradation in strength or performance. For any avid angler, that's no sacrifice at all.

"We realized very quickly there were a whole different set of challenges in the fishing industry than there were in the medical field," Ferguson said. "We went through 20 or 30 different versions and learned a lot along the way.

"My thing is, as a fisherman and a manufacturer, you have an approach of buying and making an environmentally friendly product, but you don't want to give up anything if you don't have to."

Bioline came to ICAST with 210-yard spools of 4-, 6-, 8-, 10- and 12-pound test line with a manufacturer's suggested retail price of $15.95. A 2-pound test version will be available this fall. By next year, Bioline plans to enter the saltwater market with lines in strengths of 20-, 30-, and 40-pound test.

It's been an interesting journey from the medical field to the fishing industry for Ferguson and his employees.

"We've met a lot of great people," Ferguson said. "This is a great business to be in.

"We have been very surprised at the positive response we've gotten from the industry. Some people in some industries go kicking and screaming to change. I'm surprised at how open a lot of people are to change in this industry."

With the currently available fishing lines as the basis for thought, most newcomers to Bioline want to place it in either the monofilament or fluorocarbon categories.

"It's got low visibility, like a fluorocarbon, but it's not a fluorocarbon," said Bioline manager Wayne Black. "It's got a little more stretch than nylon (monofilament), but it's got 100 percent rebound. It's got higher resistance to abrasion than nylon, and it's more UV resistant than nylon, so it lasts longer on the reel. So our product doesn't perform like a nylon either.

"We're a different animal. It's going to take some time for the industry to look at it. The castability is nice, and it has low memory on the reel.

"In testing we've done, we've had guys who've caught 200 and 300 fish in a weekend on it. And the big thing most people are afraid of — because of the word 'biodegradable' — is they're afraid they're going to lose fish.

"But this product holds its integrity for 10 to 12 months on the reel. If you're an avid fisherman, you're going

to change your line a lot more often than that."

When kept in the special packaging it comes with, Bioline claims to remain unchanged on a retailer's display rack for a minimum of five years. It's only when exposed to the natural organisms in water that the line's biodegradable clock starts ticking.

John Oliverio wasn't thinking about protecting the environment when he made that New Year's resolution to change his life. He'd been fishing since his youth, and he wasn't happy owning a hot tub business, even though it was successful.

True to his resolution, he informed his employees that he was liquidating when they arrived for work on the first business day of 1998. With the money in hand from selling his business, Oliverio decided to address a problem he'd noticed while fishing the saltwater flats near Florida's Sarasota Bay.

Anchoring his boat to fish particular spots where fish were schooled had always been a frustrating task. If you didn't do it just right, you'd either spook the fish or leave yourself in an unfavorable position to cast to them.

With an engineering background, Oliverio designed the Power-Pole Shallow Water Anchor. By 2000, Oliverio and his longtime friend Robert Shamblin had their first batch of hydraulically operated Power Poles on the market.

The Power-Pole Shallow Water Anchor is used by the majority of the 106 Bassmaster Elite Series anglers.

Weighing only 25 pounds, these highly-engineered poles had the ability to anchor a boat with a nearly-silent flip of a switch. The original Power-Pole extended six feet deep and anchored a boat with the end of a pole that left a footprint about the size of a 50-cent coin.

"Long Bar in Sarasota Bay, that's where the Power-Pole idea was born," said Oliverio, who serves as the president of the Tampa-based business.

But Oliverio quickly realized the environmental benefits of his invention. A friend had been monitoring the aquatic grass in some of the most popular flats fishing areas of Florida's coast. He'd noticed that repeated anchor dragging had left the grass mats looking like a golf course where no one had bothered to replace their divots.

The Power-Pole, while primarily designed as a fishing aid, also worked as an noninvasive alternative to traditional boat anchors.

Accomplished redfish tournament anglers Greg and Bryan Watts became the first highly-visible proponents of the Power-Pole. When Oliverio and Shamblin produced a model that extended eight feet deep, the freshwater bass fishing world took notice. Bassmaster Elite Series anglers Gary Klein and Shaw Grigsby were the first two notable tournament bass anglers to add Power-Poles to their boats in 2006.

Elite Series angler and Florida resident Chris Lane was one of the first to put a pair of Power-Poles on his boat. With this double-anchoring system, the wind couldn't spin his boat, as it might on a single pivot point, no matter what the weather.

During the ICAST show, Lane and fellow Florida pro Terry Scroggins were discussing how popular the Power-Pole had become on the Bassmaster Elite Series. They estimated that somewhere between 60 and 75 percent of the Elite Series' 106 anglers now had their boats outfitted with Power-Poles.

It was completely with the environment in mind that Oliverio decided to take the next step with his product. While designed never to leak, it's inevitable that with continued use in rough water conditions, the petroleum-based hydraulic fluid that powers the device will find its way into the water, if only a drop or two.

Oliverio made the decision to develop a "green product" that wouldn't harm the environment if a Power-Pole did begin to leak hydraulic fluid.

"I was thinking we needed to do the right thing here," Oliverio said. "These guys using Power-Poles are in the best places to fish. The worst thing that could happen would be to spill out a quart of hydraulic fluid in your favorite fishing hole.

"We try to use the best materials to make the best product so that doesn't happen. But it can."

In researching biodegradable oil for use in the Power-Pole, it was Shamblin who realized the potential to "green any boat," whether it carried a Power-Pole attached to it or not. In a partnership with a California company, Oliverio and Shamblin came to ICAST this year with 100 percent biodegradable Green Marine ISO 32 hydraulic oil. It's now included free with every Power-Pole, but it also can be used in any device requiring ISO 32 hydraulic fluid.

"ISO 32 is the most commonly used in a boat," said Shamblin, who serves as marketing director for the company. "It's what's required in most boat jack plates, tilt and trim (devices) and steering."

Shamblin said Green Marine's ISO 32 has performance standards that exceed that of the traditional petroleum-based and synthetic fluids.

In describing its proprietary formula, Shamblin would say only, "It's an annually produced specialized seed oil. Different vegetable oils can be added to it to change the viscosity."

Green Marine will soon have ISO 46 and ISO 68 hydraulic fluids available. And there are plans to market as many as 15 products under the Green Marine brand for "completely greening" a boat — everything from boat wash to bilge wash to ball-bearing and outboard motor lower unit greases.

"We're both fathers," Shamblin said of he and Oliverio. "We want our kids to enjoy the same things that we enjoy.

"We know that most outdoors people are conscientious about how they treat the environment. We thought this would be a natural fit for our product and a natural fit for a lot of fishermen."

Green Marine products allow you to make a positive change with your purchasing power. Green Marine gives you the performance you expect and the protection your equipment demands, while preserving the natural habitat.

Both Green Marine and Bioline products signal a world where more and more people are thinking seriously

along that same line, and, most importantly, doing something about it.
