

Taking flight

When Eskom allowed other companies to gain access to its fly ash – effectively lifting the monopoly on this access – it paved the way for Ulula Ash to enter the market.

WITH THE SOUTH AFRICAN economy experiencing the longest growth period since the 60s, the demand for cementitious products have also increased significantly. The demand for fly ash, which gets used primarily as a cement extender grew from 1,62 million tons/annum in 2003 to 2,5 million tons/annum in 2008. The market was already experiencing shortages for fly ash by the end of 2004. Fly Ash gets used in all sectors where cement is being used which includes tile adhesives, cement blending, construction, precast concrete, mining, brick manufacturing and readymix concrete. Fly Ash is an ultra fine powdery residue (smoke) obtained from any carbon burning process. This fine powder is normally dumped. By identifying the correct source (for example from certain coal fired power stations), the fly ash can be used as a partial cement replacement when making concrete or cementitious products.

“We therefore approached Eskom to gain access to fly ash,” says Ulula Ash’s Mark Hovy. Kriel Power Station receives all its burning coal from one dedicated source (Kriel Colliery) ensuring a high degree of consistency. The company was registered in 2006 with its main purpose to collect, beneficiate and sell fly ash to the South African building and construction industry. “Finally in July 2007 we signed a long term agreement



for extracting fly ash from Kriel Power Station.” This was a fundamental shift in Eskom’s approach as previously it was only Ash Resources who virtually had the sole rights to the fly ash since the 1970s.

“With the 10 year agreement in place we were able to secure funding and erect a greenfields fly ash extraction, classification and dispatching facility, which adds an additional 360 000 tons/annum to the market,” adds Hovy. They have now successfully entered every sector of the industry.

Ulula is a word commonly used in the Nguni group of languages. It means ‘as light as a feather’ and broadly describes something that is light and easy to do or achieve. “We felt it to be quite fitting to the term ‘fly’,” explains Hovy.

When choosing fly ash, the quality of the fly ash and its location to the market are by far the two most important criteria. “Kriel Power Station was already identified in the 1970s as a suitable source in terms of quality which was verified by us,” says Hovy. The transport component of the fly ash is often more expensive than the product itself. “The Kriel Power Station is well placed for supplying Gauteng and Mpumalanga.

In addition their fly ash is going to Cape Town where it has been specified for the harbour upgrades. They also have customers in all the provinces, and Botswana in the Southern African region.

Ulula Ash offers two products of which the Classified Fly Ash conforms to the SANS 1491 Part 2 specifications. This product has an ideal particle size and shape after classification. There is currently no specification for the unclassified ash. Their unclassified ash conforms to the future specifications which is likely to be in place by 2011.

Organisation

Ulula Ash is part of the Pronto Building Material Group and Capital Works who provided some of the capital investment requirements.

“We run a very lean organisation in terms of staffing. We have taken the approach of equipping ourselves with the best equipment and procedures allowing us to rely on a smooth running and efficient organisation,” explains Hovy. “We are fortunate to have technical expertise – these individuals who have many years experience with fly ash handling and its use in cementitious products.”

What gives them the edge is their dispatching weighbridge and storage which are located outside the Eskom security zone. The bulk tankers that load fly ash have very quick turnaround times allowing a transporter up to three loads when travelling to Johannesburg or Pretoria.

“We also give the customers a choice of sourcing their own transport or we offer them a delivered rate from our preferred transporter Haulcon, while our pricing structure is simple and quick,” says Hovy. He concludes by saying that Ulula Ash’s personal touch, which includes people big enough to listen and dedicated to delivering, also sets them apart.

Calvin Billett, managing director (right) and Jurgen Meyer, non-executive director. Meyer received an award for his contribution to the use of fly ash.

