

The founding years

Founded in the tumultuous years leading up to WWII, the future global success of the then South African Pulp and Paper Industries Limited was predicated on Argentinian, British, Chilean, and German experience and chemical engineering know-how, Italian pulp plant operators, Scottish paper makers and a dedicated South African team eager to learn from them, as Enstra Mill, the company's first, was being built and commissioned. This unique set of circumstances established a pragmatic, can-do culture of tenacious optimism and daring, that survives to this day.

Green field kraft pulp developments, supported by the development of own plantations, starting in the then Natal Midlands, followed in the ensuing years.

The early years saw the addition of paper machines, several mill expansions and the development of our patented Sapoxyl oxygen bleaching process — Enstra Mill was the first in the world to deploy this industry standard.

A key domestic player preparing to go global

Following re-registration as Sappi Limited in 1973, the company grew from strength-to-strength, becoming a key player in the South African forest products and pulp and paper industries, laying the foundation to ultimately become a significant global pulp and paper and leading dissolving wood pulp producer.

The era was characterised by green-field developments, acquisitions, significant production capacity expansions at several mills, and the introduction of ozone bleaching at Ngodwana Mill, one of the first in the world.

With the 1989 acquisition of Saiccor, Sappi entered the dissolving wood pulp market, a move that would prove pivotal in Sappi's preparedness for a successful future in the 21st century. A decade later, through a joint venture, Sappi entered the lignosulphonate business, its biggest- yet foray into extracting additional value from wood. This too would prove prescient as Sappi diversifies beyond just pulp and paper towards 2020.

Going global and preparing for renewal

The establishment of Sappi International heralded the start of Sappi's globalisation aspirations.

During the 1990s and the early 2000s the focus swung to coated fine papers through the acquisition of paper mills in the United Kingdom, followed by a number of significant acquisitions in Europe and the United States, positioning Sappi as a leading global producer. At the same time Saiccor Mill's production capacity was increased to 800,000tpa.

From 2010, the company began to invest in significant assets that contribute to its focus on improved profitability and returns across all businesses. This included further expanding dissolving wood pulp capacity (Cloquet and Ngodwana Mills), investing in containerboard (Tugela Mill) and packaging and speciality papers at Alfeld Mill.

On the cusp of renewal

Following a period of declining demand for coated printing paper in recent years, the forest products industry stands on the cusp of renewal as plantation- and forest-derived bioproducts emerge as a global game changer in a carbon constrained future.

Sappi's emphasis on, and investments in, technological innovation places the business at the forefront of developing speciality papers and moving beyond just pulp and paper as it unlocks and commercialises the potential of the biochemical extractives, microfibrils, nanocellulose fibres and cellulose nanocrystals found in wood. Sappi's recent development of a proprietary low-cost process to make nanocellulose gives the company a head start in growing adjacent businesses that add additional value to wood.

The business' integrated pulp and paper mills are ideal platforms from which to meet future demand for these products and from which to generate carbon neutral bio-energy.

