

# For the glove of it: Alabama factory picked right time to expand

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Alabama is home to the only factory producing nitrile hypoallergenic gloves, a premium item at a time when personal protective equipment is highly sought around the world.

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As hospitals globally cope with escalating needs from the coronavirus pandemic, there is only one factory in the U.S. that produces a specific kind of single use glove - and it is located in Alabama.

And shortly before anyone in the world had heard of COVID-19, that factory announced an expansion.

It's a busy time at SHOWA Group's Fayette plant, and has been for the past four months, as the factory tries to meet a growing need at the same time that the plant itself is growing.

"You look around and you see so many businesses that have been hurt by COVID-19," Mike Kimple, manufacturing manager, said. "We feel very fortunate to help fight this pandemic any way we can."

SHOWA Group, with its U.S. operations based in Menlo, Ga., employs 230 in Fayette, where they manufacture two kinds of gloves made of nitrile, a hypoallergenic synthetic rubber that is an alternative to latex. In one year, the factory can produce 400 million individual gloves. If that sounds like a lot, consider that an estimated 100 billion gloves are thrown away each year - when there's not a global pandemic.

The company has been a presence in Fayette for more than 30 years. By the time its expansion is completed, it expects to employ 400. "We're hiring every day," Kimple said.

The two glove styles - a lighter green glove and a heavier black one - are used in several different fields, but are in heavy demand these days in healthcare.



SHOWA Group announced an expansion of its Fayette plant last year - before the pandemic made PPE gloves a hot item.

In fact, Charles Miller, the company's vice president of sales, said the demand for gloves has skyrocketed since March.

"It was fairly normal up through February," he said. "Then we started seeing other countries being faced with (personal protective equipment) shortages. That started hitting the U.S. in March. Now, just the sheer volume that companies are looking for, government agencies - it's unprecedented."

The gloves are biodegradable, something that company officials point out is crucial when one considers the amount of single use gloves, masks, gowns and disinfecting wipes that are already bound for landfills around the country.

The company will begin construction of two new production lines in October, and expect to be turning out more gloves by next April. Kimple said that should double the factory's capacity, and will leave room for more production lines if needed.

Obviously, the company didn't know what was just around the corner when it announced the expansion. "We wanted to increase the capacity in Fayette, and we wanted to upgrade our equipment to a more modern manufacturing base," Kimple said.

Production continued through the early days of the pandemic, as the factory was deemed an essential business. Kimple said masks, social distancing, barriers between work stations and staggered breaks resulted in no cases of coronavirus there.

Today, the company announced a partnership with the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) manufacturing division, which encompasses distribution, packaging and fulfillment of glove orders. CABVI President Ed Welsh said almost half of its employees are legally blind or visually impaired - a historically underserved workforce segment hit particularly hard by the economic fallout from COVID-19.

"They see a need to further their commitment to U.S. manufacturing, and that's very important," Miller said.

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