



## SURFERS HIT HARD BY FOAM COMPANY CLOSURE

*The closure of a small company in California that supplied most of the foam for surfboards all over the world has sent shockwaves through the surfing community and prices through the roof.*

The price of a custom surfboard went up \$200 overnight on news that Clark Foam – the country’s primary supplier of foam used to make surfboards – was shutting its doors.

Gordon Clark, founder of Clark Foam and co-inventor of the foam surfboard, announced the decision Dec. 5.

### **Cornering the foam surfboard market**

Clark Foam produced surfboard blanks – blocks of foam that manufacturers and craftsmen, called shapers, cut, sand and paint to make custom surfboards.

Before the invention of foam boards in 1958, surfboards had been made of balsa wood and had to be carved by hand.

Lighter, stronger, more flexible and more durable than the wooden boards, foam boards could be mass produced and helped change surfing from an eclectic hobby enjoyed by a few into a cultural phenomenon symbolic of the California lifestyle.

“Clark Foam supplied the unshaped blanks for about 90 percent of all custom-made boards purchased worldwide – and those boards make up nearly three-quarters of the total international market,” Bjorn Deboer of Stewart Surfboards told the Associated Press.

The rest of the \$200 million dollar U.S. market is comprised of boards mass produced in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Clark Foam’s dominance as a supplier means its closure will affect all levels of the surfing industry.

Surfers can expect higher prices, small surf shops may not be able to re-stock their shelves, and, unless a new supplier is found soon, many in California’s cottage industry of custom board shapers will be out of work.

### **Can anyone replace Clark Foam?**

The virtual monopoly Clark Foam has enjoyed is no accident.

Gordon Clark “undercut all competitors, and he froze out shapers who used other sources. He was shipping a thousand blanks a day. There’s nobody who can replace him,” explained Mark Massara, a San Francisco area surfer and director of the Sierra Club’s California Coastal Program, in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle.

With so few competitors, surf shops, surfboard manufacturers and shapers are having a difficult time finding new suppliers.

U.S. shops can get comparable supplies from Australia, but since December is summer in the land down under, most of those blanks are already committed to local shops.

### **Clark Foam vs. environmentalists**

In his letter, Gordon Clark cites the cost and frustration of complying with state and county environmental regulations as the reason for his decision to close up shop.

The primary concern involves Clark Foam's use of the toxic chemical Toulene Diisocynate, or TDI. Exposure to TDI particles in the air can cause severe and chronic lung problems.

Clark does not dispute the seriousness of the concerns. He openly acknowledges that "our official safety record as an employer is not very good" and that "we do emit over 4,000 pounds of styrene fumes per year."

However, he contends he spent nearly a million dollars to comply with regulations, eating away at profits.

Clark complains the government put him out of business. "It is a terrible feeling when one person walks in and says what you are doing is wrong. Now and then it is OK, but when an agency does it over and over you finally get the message. ...The state of California and especially Orange County, where Clark Foam is located, have made it very clear they no longer want manufacturers like Clark Foam in their area," he said.

Government officials reject Clark's allegation they are to blame for his company's demise.

The Environment Protection Agency says Clark has had some problems in the past but is currently in compliance.

"There's a whole bunch of surfers out there complaining we shut them down," EPA spokesman Mark Merchant told the Orange County Register. "We didn't shut him down."

Merchant described Gordon Clark's decision to close his business as "an excessive response."

As for Clark's complaints, Merchant counters that "the agency understands compliance can be costly and difficult, and we have an assistance program to help people out. Shutting down business is not our goal."

*-- Compiled by Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra*

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