

# Fire Apparatus & Emergency Equipment

## Kochek Is Prospering By Making Connections

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For more than 20 years Kochek Company has been making suction hose, strainers, adapters, tools and a myriad of appliances to help firefighters move water from its source to the fire scene.

"Kochek makes connections," said Charlie Kozey, the vice president of the business he and his brother Greg created and own. "That's the consistent theme through everything we sell."

At the time Kochek was incorporated in 1988 in Eastford, Conn., Greg was chief of the Eastford Volunteer Fire Department, a post he held for 11 years. The company's original plant — a barn behind an antique Cape house — was expanded to 30,000 square feet, and four years ago Kochek added a 60,000-square-foot building 12 miles away in Putnam, Conn. The two plants employ 90 people.

"Our story has always been we build one piece and it leads us into another," Greg, the company president, said. "There's a natural progression to what we have been doing... We sold you a strainer, now we can sell you a piece of suction hose, and now we've got adapters."

Kochek made its early reputation and gained name respect by producing quality suction hose and strainers. Then it created a catalog and expanded its products to include hose appliances such as wyes, valves, street manifolds, hydrant wrenches, spanners, hydrant conversions, large diameter hose and a wide variety of specialty products.

"We can give you a packaged, all-in-one purchase to handle everything from the water source to the fire, and you can have it any way you want it," Charlie Kozey said. "If you want to color code everything, we can provide that too. You can have your own identity."

### Leaving The Farm

Greg, 61, and Charlie, 45, grew up on a dairy farm, the sons of an Eastford firefighter, but their dad encouraged them to head out on their own and find careers. Greg found his vocational calling as a machinist and toolmaker after attending a local trade school, and he followed his father into the volunteer fire service in 1967. After working for a number of local shops and for aircraft engine giant Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford, Conn., he decided to strike out on his own.



The first product made and marketed by Kochek was a floating drafting strainer that founder Greg Kozey designed for his fire department in Eastford, Conn. This one was made for the fire department in nearby Danielson. **(Kochek Photo)**

Using a machine he bought for \$2,500 with money he got from his dad, Greg got a bank loan to cover his bills for a month, quit his job and formed Phoenix Tool & Die in 1980. For a family man with two young girls, it was risky, but he had plenty of work from moonlighting, and he had confidence. "I started making parts and billing, and I've never stopped," he said.

As Greg's business grew to employ about a dozen people, Charlie finished school and became a welder. "It escalated into me having my own tool, die and welding company," Charlie said. His business was called Hi-Tech Welding, specializing in exotic metals and fabrication.

The two brothers shared leased space in the Eastford barn in the 1980s and later bought the property. The similarities in their businesses led them to blend them together, and they incorporated as Kochek in 1988. A third Kozey brother, Michael, later joined the company in the engineering department.

The first two letters of the company's name — Ko — come from the family name, and the last four letters — chek — signify check, the mark of excellence. "It's kind of corny," Greg said, "but that's as easy as it gets."

Kochek's first fire service product was a floating drafting strainer. Greg designed it in 1988 for his department's water supply pumper. It had to fit into a compartment and be light enough for one person to deploy. "We still make those today," he said.

The floating strainer was such a good idea that neighboring departments wanted them, and Greg and Charlie were happy to oblige. The strainer also caught the eye of the late Larry Davis, a nationally recognized authority and book author on rural water supply. Davis saw the product while conducting a class in Eastford and told Greg he felt it was nationally marketable. "Having somebody like Larry come in and say we could sell these things all across the country was kind of neat," Greg said.

At the request of Davis, Greg went to the Alaska Fire Chiefs Association show in 1988. Davis and a colleague, Lee Husted, had done consulting work to improve water supply techniques and training there and used Kochek strainers in the process.

While in Alaska, Greg learned about PVC flexible drafting hose used by the local fire service, but it had a fatal flaw — the ends would break off due to excessive compression from the couplers. Recognizing the versatility of flexible, lightweight drafting hose, Greg was determined to find a way to make it work. He did research on the hose itself and the coupler maker and then set about to build a better product.

"To make a long story short, I was sitting on the deck one day, and I was looking at the garden hose we used," he recalled. "It used a shank coupling with two clamps on each side, and I said, 'That's it.'" He contracted with the hose maker, developed a new coupling and started selling his improved version to the fire service.

For years, Kochek has dominated the PVC suction hose market, but has recently been seeing some competition. Charlie said the competitive brand uses commercial grade hose that he feels won't stand up to fire service rigors as well because it has a smaller supporting helix and thinner ribs.



Greg Kozey, left, and Charlie Kozey incorporated Kochek in 1988 and developed a wide variety of products to help move water from a source to a fire scene. **(Fire Apparatus Photo by Ed Ballam)**



Kochek switched to stainless steel locking mechanisms on all its Storz head couplings because the material is stronger than the standard aluminum locks, making its products safer. **(Fire Apparatus Photo by Ed Ballam)**

## PVC Suction Hose

Commercial PVC suction hose is prone to collapse, according to Lou Thomas, Kocheck's director of corporate sales, who said the hose Kocheck buys is custom made. "The color and the strength was developed exclusively for the fire service," he said, "and we've been using it for 20 years."

Greg's Alaskan trip not only led to the inspiration for Kocheck flexible suction hose, but also was an opportunity to sign up several new Kocheck dealers. They landed an enormous contract to provide suction hose to clean up the March 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill that dumped 10.8 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound.

Kocheck supplied tens of thousands of feet of PVC suction hose for the effort. It was a huge boost to the fledgling company, and two employees hired at that time still remain on the payroll today.

Dan Olm, Kocheck's director of operations, who has responsibilities for the Putnam plant, said the company has a number of long-time employees, and he attributes that to a good work environment and managers who listen. "We communicate daily to make sure everybody is on the same page," he said.

Olm's counterpart, Rick Lopes, the Eastford facility manager, said Kocheck employees care about quality. "We understand the importance of what we do," he said. "People's lives depend on these products. You can tell people care by the way they check over their finished parts and test them all."

Lopes also appreciates the aggressiveness exhibited by the Kozseys. "Greg and Charlie are constantly pushing us to be better," he said. "Their competition is pushing them to be better too. If you're not the lead dog, the view doesn't change. I like being the lead dog."

## Expansion

Secure in their leadership of the PVC flexible suction hose market, cemented by the Alaska clean-up contract, the Kozseys set their sights on further fire service expansion.

While making suction hose lengths, Kocheck uses a variety of aluminum couplings, and Greg said he always looks for new ways to use those parts in new products. Nearly every product the company makes is constructed of high-grade 6061-T6 aluminum, the same type used in aircraft, he said.

Six-inch, long-handle couplings are common in the fire service, so Kocheck buys raw, extruded aluminum stock by the linear foot. It's cut and machined on computer numeric controlled (CNC) machines and made into finished parts. Kocheck's next natural progression was to go into adapters, valves and similar water handling products. They also produce custom work ordered by clients.

"Because we both came from a job shop background, we were very used to dealing with customers who wanted something unique," Greg said. "We have no problem with one-offs." By manufacturing everything in-house, Charlie said, "We can give you any kind of thread you want, any color you want."

Kocheck's in-house powder coating gives the company total control over its products and is environmentally friendly compared to other available finishes, Charlie noted.



Female rocker lug 2.5-inch fittings, and other parts, are hung in rows on a conveyor system to receive a powder coat finish. Kocheck does powder coating in-house, offering a rainbow of colors.



Joe Rocha installs a Storz head coupling on 4-inch large diameter hose, a relatively new product in the Kocheck catalog. **(Fire Apparatus Photo)**

## Color-Coding

Thomas said color-coding is one example of the customization that is a trademark of Kocheck Company. "A lot of ideas for what we make has come from the firefighters," he said. "They'll ask us if we can make something and all of a sudden, we have a new product."

As the business grew, the Kozseys made connections throughout the industry, supplying apparatus builders with pump accessories and nozzle and appliance manufacturers with the couplings, swivels and connections that make things work together.

In addition, Charlie pointed out, Kocheck was often able to design a part that was of lighter weight yet stronger than what was in current use. "To this day, we build products for a whole lot of fire service people and never put our name on it," Greg said. "We're just making that little part that makes the connection."

To make yet more connections, Kocheck needed Storz couplings, a quarter-turn hose connector invented in Germany in the 1880s. In the 1990s, they weren't easy to get in the States, except on large diameter hose (LDH), but Kocheck needed them for several products demanded by fire departments.

After some experimentation, Kocheck developed a forged Storz coupling of its own that has a 900-psi burst rating, the highest in the industry. "With forging, we maintain the grain structure of the aluminum," Charlie said.

The company has recently converted to all stainless steel locks on its Storz couplings and has introduced a line of Storz hydrant converters giving municipalities the opportunity to install quick hook-ups to existing hydrants.

Greg has also made a number of connections through fire trade associations and has served on National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) committees and as secretary of the Fire Apparatus Manufacturers Association (FAMA). Doug Bonney, Kocheck's director of outside sales, is a board member of the Fire and Emergency Manufacturers and Services Association (FEMSA).

## Strong Relationships

"The original equipment manufacturers (OEM) took us in and put their arms around us and helped us get into the fire market," Charlie said. Kocheck's relationship with OEMs continues to be strong. About four years ago, the company hired John Swanson, a veteran of the fire apparatus market, to become the company's first director of OEM sales. "I've got 50 OEMs in the North American market," he said. "It's growing because of our product quality. Almost every single piece is made in the United States. We stand behind everything we make, and we provide good service at competitive prices."

While expanding in the U.S. market, Kocheck has also moved into international sales, doing business in about 30 countries. "The American fire service is still something we can sell to the world," Greg said.

He is very comfortable with the concept that firefighters are firefighters the world over.

"The fire service is really what I love," he said. "To go out and talk to firefighters and build fire stuff, that's the greatest. If I'm talking to a firefighter in South Dakota or Hawaii or going out to lunch with the head of Civil Defense in Lebanon, it's real exciting for me."



Matt Rodman assembles a low-level drafting strainer with a 6-inch, long-handle threaded coupling, signature products for Kocheck.



Gary Appley, who is on Kocheck's packing and shipping team, boxes a ball intake valve with a Storz head for shipment. Kocheck ships to more than 30 countries.