

Molok North America

Molok is a new generation designer and manufacturer of the original semi-underground waste containment systems.

Headquarters	152 Harry Bye Blvd, Mount Forest, Ontario, N0G 2L0
Year Established	1999
NAICS	326198 - All other plastic product manufacturing
Employees	20
Major Expansions	2017
Exports	N/A
Parent Company	N/A
Other Locations	N/A

From cities and national parks to restaurants and university campuses, Molok North America Ltd. (Molok NA) keeps them all pristine with its array of waste storage systems. Molok NA's facilities are located in Mount Forest Ontario, and its achievements include being included in Canada's "Profit 500" list. However, for the company's chief executive officer, Marja Hillis, the road to becoming one of Canada's "Top Female Entrepreneurs" was not always an easy one.

In the 1980s, Hillis' father, Veikko Salli, owned numerous restaurants and fitness centres in Finland. His office offered a view of a nearby dumpster, with the accompanying birds, rats, overflowing trash, and smell. "There has to be a better way [to store garbage]," he declared. After searching for a solution and uncovering no results, Salli resolved to invent a solution himself, and the Molok container was born. Two-thirds of the container are underground, thereby cooling the waste and reducing odours in the summer, while also preventing freezing in the winter. The container's innovative design increases its capacity by five times and is more hygienic compared to an above-ground container, as well as enhancing visual appeal.

Hillis was Molok's first champion and sales representative. Initially, funds were limited. Hillis was also managing a fitness centre that was floundering in the global recession. "And the only person I didn't pay was myself," she recalls. When she came to Canada in 1997, it was as a single mother with a one-year-old daughter. Hillis knew one person on the whole continent, but she was determined to introduce Molok containers to the North American market. "[It was hard] trying to sell my dad's product in a 99 per cent male market," she admits. Initially, people didn't take Hillis or her product seriously. "There were lots of struggles . . . If you're female, you must work harder to prove yourself. But I always had a vision, and everything I did, I did according to that vision." Already a full-time mother and entrepreneur, Hillis decided to pursue a

degree in French at the University of Waterloo, with a minor in fine arts.

With time, word about Molok containers began to spread and sales soared. Although the company's basic product research and development is still conducted in Finland, Molok NA provides "Canadianized" solutions. Bear-proof lids for national and provincial parks, such as Algonquin Provincial Park, are a prime example. In a partnership with the Montreal branch of the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, Molok NA also developed donated clothing containers that save space, and protect against rain, and thieves.

Deceptively simple in concept, Molok containers are difficult to imitate in practice. There are hundreds of parts to the plastic containers, every one of which has arrived at its current form through decades of research and innovation. With characteristic magnanimity, however, Hillis says that she would welcome competitors. "Even though we have only a few repeat customers because these things last forever," she explains, "it would take generations and generations to sell to everyone. Good competitors help spread the word."

Hillis is equally generous with her 20 employees, saying, "They're like family here." Every year, she spends days preparing a Christmas feast for her staff and their families, as well as several barbecues throughout the year. The quality of the employees is a key reason for Molok NA's rural Southwestern Ontario location. "The work ethics are just better here," Hillis says. "People are loyal; we have employees that have been with the Molok family for over ten years." Mount Forest is an excellent location for other reasons too. The unincorporated community is small, but there is a critical mass of manufacturing in the area. Mount Forest is also a 90-minute drive from the Toronto Pearson International Airport and even closer to Kitchener-Waterloo, and development charges for businesses are lower than those of larger cities. "It makes me so mad when people say manufacturing is dead in Ontario or Canada," Hillis says. "When you go offshore, sure you'd get something cheaper, but you're not in any kind of control over quality or delivery." Dealing with local businesses is much better, she says: "As long as you keep innovating, and taking advantage of government programs like [the Scientific Research and Experimental Development] program (SR&ED), you'll stay alive. . . . There are a lot of people here. Why [would] you go somewhere else?"

Conventional success notwithstanding, Hillis is continuously driven by a thirst for learning and growth, and has recently she returned to school for her executive MBA. Like Hillis, Molok NA is always growing, ready for whatever the future may bring.

Update:

In 2019, Molok North America celebrated its 20th year in operations. For its recent success, the firm has been recognized with many high-profile awards such as Business Worldwide's Most Innovative CEO award in 2016 and The New Economy's Most Innovative Waste Company award in 2017.

In 2017, Molok began construction on additional office space, bringing the firm's total facility space to 50,000 sq. ft. Additionally, the new offices are located on a large plot of land that will allow the firm to continue to expand well into the future.

In March 2018, Molok North America's Founder and CEO, Marja Hillis, passed away. Her partner, Mark Hillis, has since assumed the position of CEO.