Nonwoven polypropylene has never been so popular.

The industrial fabric is a critical component of the sophisticated face masks that protect medical workers from the new coronavirus. As the virus spreads around the world, those face masks are in short supply. Now nonwoven polypropylene is, too.

Potential customers looking for the oil-derived textile have offered manufacturers huge markups and even vacations to fill their orders. Companies are adding capacity, increasing production and air-shipping orders to customers to keep up.

“This has been unprecedented demand,” said Thomas Salmon, chief executive of Berry Global Group Inc. The Evansville, Ind.-based manufacturer recently shifted most of a production line that had been making parts for air filters to make more nonwoven polypropylene fabrics for masks instead.
At the Monadnock Non-Wovens factory.
PHOTO: HANNAH YOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn’t recommend that people wear face masks unless they are sick and need to be in public. Officials say buying up the sophisticated N95 masks—so called because they filter out 95% of tiny particles—that typically contain nonwoven polypropylene leaves fewer for health workers who need to wear them while treating patients infected with the virus.

Some big manufacturers including 3M Co. make many of the components for N95 masks themselves, but others rely on specialized suppliers. Monadnock Non-Wovens LLC has been getting more than 100 calls and emails a day asking for huge quantities of nonwoven polypropylene. Some callers have offered luxury vacations to Monadnock employees to fulfill orders.

Some customers are asking the Mt. Pocono, Pa.-based company for up to 200 tons of the material. The single machine on Monadnock’s production line for the mask-filter material makes about 1.5 tons a day. The company recently started a test run of a second machine and will add a third in the coming weeks that will triple output to around 30 tons a week.

Mr. Lemley, left, and employee John Rasmussen at Monadnock Non-Wovens.
PHOTO: HANNAH YOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The company has expanded overtime for its permanent staff of under 100 employees. It has hired about eight temporary workers and is looking for more, which has been difficult given the tight
labor market. Monadnock said it has increased prices slightly for existing customers to account for the extra overtime, and is charging more to new customers.

“People are saying, ‘Name your price,’” said Keith Hayward, Monadnock’s managing director. “We don’t work like that.”

Ray Whitby, a Monadnock sales manager, said some buyers are paying for air shipment because the standard *seaborne container shipments* would take too long and are running behind schedule. “The economics are out the window,” Mr. Whitby said.

A machine at the factory.
PHOTO: HANNAH YOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

One executive at another company who asked not to be named because of the volume of requests for masks he is receiving said he had stocked up on polypropylene resin to ensure continued production after running short during the 2009 influenza pandemic, which the CDC estimates left 60.8 million people ill in the U.S. About 12,500 died.

Mask maker Medicom Group, based in Montreal, operates three factories in China, including one in Wuhan, where the epidemic emerged. Its supply of materials in China has been diverted by
government officials to produce masks for use there, said Kathy Lee, a senior sourcing manager for Medicom.

She is searching for reputable suppliers in other countries, and Medicom is considering airlifting a shipment to China, though the cost may be too high. That is if she can find a supplier. “It’s not easy to get,” she said.

Medicom has been able to get nonwoven polypropylene and other supplies for its factory in France, but sometimes runs short between deliveries. Production lines sometimes sit idle for hours awaiting fresh stock, Medicom general manager Gerald Heuliez said.

Executives said Medicom is also paying at least 10% more for mask materials than before the epidemic.

Nozi Hamidi, a marketing executive at Schweitzer-Mauduit International Inc. in Alpharetta, Ga., said the materials manufacturer has turned away calls from people seeking to buy filter components and sell them at a premium to manufacturers desperate for supplies. “A lot of the inquiries are not from people who make face masks,” she said. “It’s people trying to get in it and make a buck.”

Ms. Hamidi said the company is prioritizing longtime customers before taking on new business. “We are pretty much fully booked for the year,” she said.
Other mask components, such as the metal piece that sits on the bridge of the nose, are also in high demand. Rea Magnet Wire Co. has expanded production of those metal components at its plant in Fort Wayne, Ind., to three shifts a day, up from one before the epidemic.

The company has maintained prices for existing customers. “When a new customer comes in, we are giving them a slight premium over the normal pricing,” said Pablo Leguina, the company’s chief marketing officer.

Stephen Copperwheat, president of industrial textile maker Environmental Composites Inc., said his company is getting 20 calls a day from people representing overseas buyers looking for mask components. Environmental Composites makes filters for jet fuel and other industrial applications, but not for N95 masks.

“Don’t ask me if I have polypropylene,” he said. “We don’t make it. We use it.”

Other companies are firing up new mask production lines to address the surge in demand. At HPK Industries in Utica, N.Y., a half-dozen workers are sewing face masks by hand for workers in clean rooms at pharmaceutical companies. Those workers typically wear masks that are now being bought up as a result of the epidemic. HPK saw an opportunity to make masks for industrial settings that don’t have to meet requirements quite as stringent as medical masks.

Each worker takes several minutes to sew one mask, compared with automated machines that other companies use to pump out dozens in the same amount of time. HPK, which typically makes products including disposable coveralls, decided to start making masks this week because customers couldn’t find them elsewhere.

“Everyone thinks there is this magic factory somewhere,” HPK’s president, Michael Liberatore, said. “You can’t call up and order a million. It’s not how it works.”
Mr. Rasmussen labeling at the factory.
PHOTO: HANNAH YOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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