

A New Kid (Lighting) On The Block

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By Richard Harker

A sign that reefkeeping is maturing as a hobby is the proliferation of companies that serve the hobby. During the early days of reefkeeping, hobbyists had a limited number of options when assembling a reef tank. There were only a handful of companies that built the specialized equipment a reef tank required. Today, things are very different. Numerous companies offer competing products in virtually all areas of reefkeeping equipment. While the number of companies serving reefkeepers has grown in all areas, the area where we've seen the greatest growth is lighting. There are more lighting options available, and more companies building and distributing lighting equipment than ever before.

One of the latest entrants is PFO Lighting, of Vancouver, Washington. This industrial lighting company first displayed its products at last year's Marine Aquarium Conference of North America, and, since then, has developed one of the most complete single source lines of lighting equipment available to the reefkeeping hobby. The company manufactures and sells everything from a simple but functional plug-in mogul socket bracket to a complete lighting setup, including a specular aluminum reflector canopy that accommodates both metal halide lamps and fluorescent tubes, a plug-in ballast and choice of metal halide lamps from 70 to 1000 watts.

Too often, companies that serve the hobby have offered poorly made, unreliable equipment. The small number of reefkeeping hobbyists discouraged larger more professional companies from entering the market. Consequently, the companies creating hobbyist-oriented products were generally little more than handy hobbyists handcrafting small quantities of items in converted garages. PFO Lighting's primary product is industrial lighting, which means the company is equipped to produce rugged, high-quality lighting equipment in quantity. The company meets stringent UL rating requirements, a standard rarely met in hobby equipment.

An example of one of the quality products PFO Lighting offers is their line of metal halide ballasts. The company manufactures over two dozen different types. Enclosures are heavy-duty extruded aluminum and can accommodate one to three ballasts. The ballast enclosures use Molex connectors to connect to the reflector assembly.

Each ballast in multiple ballast enclosures can be independently controlled, so lights can be cycled on and off. The company even offers a ballast designed for use with European HQI metal halide bulbs, making it one of the few companies to offer ballasts actually designed for the popular German metal halides.

PFO Lighting also produces a line of parabolic specular aluminum reflectors. Specular aluminum is a highly polished mirror-like reflector material first introduced into the hobby in the SpiderLight reflector from Digital Ocean. Whereas the SpiderLight comes in a single size, PFO Lighting produces a wide range of reflector sizes to accommodate multiple bulb canopies.

Even more importantly, the company produces a specular metal halide reflector that can accommodate fluorescent tubes. Many hobbyists like to use a combination of metal halide and fluorescent lighting over their tanks, and the design of the SpiderLight reflector made the addition of fluorescent tubes difficult. PFO Lighting solved the problem by adding wide flanges to their parabolic reflectors, pre-punched to handle fluorescent tube sockets.

The standard metal halide socket assembly bolts to the reflector and plugs into the ballast with a Molex connector. The standard ballasts offered by PFO Lighting are tar style core and coil ballasts. The Molex connectors, however, are designed so the reflector/bulb assembly can be plugged into an IceCap metal halide electronic ballast. A hobbyist concerned about reliability will appreciate the flexibility this provides. Ballasts can be quickly swapped out if one fails.

PFO Lighting offers a wide range of metal halide bulbs for their fixtures. They carry Venture 5500 Kelvin (K) bulbs in 175 to 400 watt sizes, Iwasaki 6500 K bulbs in 70 to 400 watt sizes, and European higher color temperature bulbs from 175 to 1000 watts.

The growth of professional companies like PFO Lighting is an encouraging sign for the hobby. We should see an improvement in both selection and quality of products as new companies begin serving the marine and reefkeeping hobbyist. We should also see a downward pressure on prices with increased competition. The hobby can only benefit from new entrants like PFO Lighting.

