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## Clear skies for WahlcoMetroflex Company engineers get boost from green-leaning manufacturers

By Carol Coultas , Business Writer  
Wednesday, June 13, 2007

LEWISTON - At WahlcoMetroflex, it's all about regulating the flow.

For their engineers, that means managing the path of gases going from one industrial use to another (think exhaust from a coal-fired boiler flowing into a chamber where pollutants are removed). But it applies to their business model as well.



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With 90 projects on the books right now, the precision engineering and manufacturing firm is on pace to double last year's revenues, and it breaks ground today on a 17,000-square-foot addition that will expand the plant by almost 50 percent.

The \$2.5 million project, including new equipment and renovations, will help position the company for continued growth - a far cry from its bankruptcy status in 2001.

"As long as people care about the environment, we should be all right," said John Powell, president. "Business is very good right now."

And likely to get better as two sets of federal air emissions standards loom for coal-fired power plants. Of the 800 facilities in the United States, about 50 percent have to meet new emissions standards by 2010 and the remaining by 2014.

WahlcoMetroflex is the leading supplier of components such as dampers, diverters and expansion joints that channel gases through a coal-fired power plant before being released to the air. "It's a boon to us," said Powell of the regulations, which sprang from a law championed long ago by Maine Sens. George Mitchell and Edmund Muskie.

But power plants aren't the company's only customer. Any industrial facility with a smokestack is a potential customer, from paper mills to pharmaceutical plants and oil refineries. The company's components can be spotted in smokestacks all over the world, from desalination plants in the Mideast to gas-fired turbine power plants in Italy.

The company's growing international presence helped it snare the Maine Exporter of the Year award from the Small Business Administration two weeks ago.

"About 25 percent of our revenues last year came from offshore," Powell said. "This year we expect to do a little less than that because there's so much business here with the coal-fired industry ... that's where we're

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concentrating."

And why it needs more floor space. The 35-year-old company's last expansion was 16 years ago.

A narrow hallway separates the cubicles of the company's 20 engineers from the production floor, where welders and fabricators assemble the components. Some are small - expansion joints the size of an SUV wheel. Others are mammoth, such as the 70,000-pound double louver that stretches 24 feet in one direction and 22 feet in another.

The louver - sort of a giant Venetian blind - is one of eight that will be shipped to the John E. Amos power plant in West Virginia, part of a \$3 million order for that facility. The project is on schedule for its July shipping date, but WahlcoMetroflex needs something else to keep pace with its growth.

"We'd hire 20 welders tomorrow if we could find them" said John Bader, chief operating officer. He and Powell lamented the loss of the welding programs at vocational schools and have set up their own training programs to fill the void.

"They're good jobs with great pay and benefits," said Bader, noting that at least nine employees have been with the company 25 years or more. Wages for new welders range from \$15 to \$20 an hour.

A skilled, dedicated workforce is the single greatest asset WahlcoMetroflex has, Powell said. In 2001, when he, Bader and five other employees bought the bankrupt company, there were 60 employees; now they're at 113. And they expect to remain busy.

Besides the new U.S. regulations, many European power plants are switching from gas to coal because of the volatility of natural gas prices. And once current U.S. standards have been met, there's the potential for new regulations stemming from greenhouse gas initiatives that are just beginning to gain political momentum. Ethanol production is another area that looks rosy for future markets.

Powell pointed out that the existing air pollution laws were passed in 1970, but it took decades of wrangling and lawsuits before they were actually enacted. He expects the same process for greenhouse gas standards.

"We're all hoping the Democrats remain in power for the next few years," he quipped.

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