People informing People
THE HAWK EYE

Siemens rides the rails

By NICHOLAS BERGIN
nbergin@thehawkeye.com

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FORT MADISON -- One of southeast Iowa's newest industrial employers, Siemens Power Generation, has teamed up for the first time with one of the state's industrial pioneers, the railroad.

Siemens on Monday rolled out its first full rail shipment of 42 wind turbine blades to the sounds of cheers, whistles and the blast of a train horn. Each blade is 148 feet long and weighs about 12 tons.

"It (rail transportation) means more flexibility," plant manager Bjarne Joergensen said. "It's more competitive. Also, it's much better on the environment. Instead of using a lot of diesel and trucks, we use less here (with trains)."

More than 200 of the company's 380 employees gathered outside the recently constructed loading facility Monday morning for a brief ceremony and a group photo in front of the BNSF Railway engine pulling the blades.

After leaving Fort Madison, the blades traveled to Burlington where they switched to an east-west track before heading to Pasco, Ore. There, they will be loaded onto trucks and transported about 80 miles to the Biglow Canyon wind farm in Sherman County, Ore.

For shipping by rail, five cars are linked together as a single solid unit on which two blades are loaded using two yellow overhead cranes. The cranes, housed in the recently constructed loading facility, are used for loading both rail and semitrailers, Joergensen said.

Railcars loaded with the massive white blades likely will become a regular sight in the area. Any order to be shipped more than 500 miles will be transported by rail. For shorter distances, the blades will be moved by truck, Joergensen said.

The next rail shipment of blades will take place in about three weeks. After that, company officials expect to begin rolling out a loaded train a week until May, when shipments likely will slow, Joergensen said.

Construction of the rail-loading facility was part of a $33 million expansion Siemens announced a year ago, just six months after the first blade rolled off the business's production line.

As part of the expansion, Siemens also has added 75,000 square feet to its existing building and constructed a second 125,000-square-foot finishing facility. At that time, officials also announced the company's workforce would be expanded to about 530 by 2011.

However, business has not grown as fast as anticipated, so the company has not added jobs as quickly as projected.

"We're just not ramping up as fast people-wise. But we will over time," human resources manager Roger Brown said.

The company produces about 20 blades a week. When the expansion was announced, officials had anticipated enough demand to ramp up production to 25 to 30 blades a week, Brown said.

Once demand begins to climb, the company will begin hiring again, but officials don't know when that will be.

"It's just slowed down because of the economic condition," Brown said. "Some of the customers have delayed some of their projections based on financing."

However, there remains a keen interest across the country in producing more "green energy." But finding financing for such projects has become difficult, Brown said.

Construction of large wind farms requires long-term loan financing, which has become difficult to come by because of the banking crisis gripping the nation, Brown said.

"So I think the financial crisis, that is the only thing that has truly impacted the wind business, that I can tell," he said.

Like the rest of the nation, Siemens officials eagerly are waiting to see how the recently passed $787 billion federal stimulus will affect national economic recession and banking crisis.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, recently visited the Fort Madison plant and spoke with Siemens

officials about their concerns and the conditions necessary for the industry to thrive.

Joergensen said the senator emphasized the need to find a solution to the banking crisis and expand the national power grid, as well as creating more incentives for renewable energy.

An expansion of the power grid would allow for more wind turbines to be constructed and plugged into the grid, meaning an increase in sales for producers like Siemens.

Matt Ryerson/The Hawk Eye
A train load hauling 42 wind turbine blades made by Siemens Power Generation winds its way through downtown Burlington on Monday. It was the first time the Fort Madison plant has used the railroad to transport the huge wind turbine blades.


Matt Ryerson/The Hawk Eye
Jimmy Daggs of Donnellson takes pictures of a train hauling 42 wind turbine blades passing by an intersection Monday after leaving the Siemens plant in Fort Madison. Daggs heard from friends that the train load of blades would be leaving Monday so he went to witness it.
Wind turbine blades heading west in first trip by railcars.