

Wind turbine novices seek toehold

Christensen Shipyards offshoot fires up blade production line



Photo by Steven Lane

Renewable Energy Composite Solutions landed a contract with Skyron Systems Inc. to build vertical wind turbines with the help of a \$1 million federal stimulus grant to install the production line.

By Libby Tucker

Sunday, May 23, 2010

Renewable Energy Composite Solutions this week fired up its first production line making small wind turbine blades in Vancouver. That milestone came nearly a year after the company, a spinoff of Christensen Shipyards, landed a \$1 million federal stimulus grant to retool its yacht-building business to make components for the wind and wave energy industries.

Attracted by a host of incentives, Christensen launched the new venture in an effort to diversify a luxury product line hit hard in the recession. The company has since discovered that entering a booming new market doesn't guarantee work, despite a proven track record in manufacturing. Its first two contracts, to build vertical wind turbines for Skyron Systems Inc. and a wave energy test buoy for SAIC, are still its only two contracts.

Progress has been slow, but steady, in part because the company lacks the "legitimacy and pedigree" to win bigger customers in the already well-established supply chain for wind turbines, said Brad Given, director of operations for Renewable Energy Composite Solutions, known as RECS.

RECS needs more contacts within the industry, before it will land new contracts, Given said.

And so RECS will join a delegation of nine manufacturers and contractors, including two others from Vancouver, representing the Portland-metro region May 23-26 at Windpower 2010, one of the largest wind energy trade shows in the world. The team, which includes JH Kelly and Columbia Machine, will travel to Dallas to pitch Southwest Washington as a hub for wind energy component manufacturing and repair, as well as to garner contracts for their



Photo by Steven Lane

The Columbian

Maria Deloa checks the flow rate of resin into a foam and fiberglass blade for a vertical

businesses.

“Part of our conference involvement is having meetings with people, putting ourselves out there as a resource in this region,” said Rob Harris, vice president of JH Kelly, a Longview-based industrial contractor with offices in Vancouver. “Then we’ll come back to hit the market harder.”

wind turbine. Renewable Energy Composite Solutions, a spinoff of Christensen Shipyards, last week started production of a new line of small vertical wind turbines.

CREDC support

The companies will have an exhibit booth at the event and will host a reception on May 25 with the theme: “Pacific Northwest Wind Team, Your Supplier Connection.” They will be accompanied by representatives from the Columbia River Economic Development Council, which helped organize the trip in partnership with Business Oregon, the Portland Development Commission, Portland General Electric, the city of Gresham and the West Columbia Gorge Chamber of Commerce.

Part of CREDC’s 2010 budget includes funds for creating a wind energy supply chain in Southwest Washington, said Jeanie Ashe, director of business recruitment with the Columbia River Economic Development Council. The development council will likely break even on the conference, but many of those involved won’t recoup the full cost of their efforts, she said.

In addition to coordinating the trip, the organizations have provided marketing support to the participating companies, helped them develop business leads and arranged meetings at the conference with potential customers for a package deal of \$1,500 per company.

JH Kelly is the most experienced of the three Vancouver delegates in the renewable energy industry. The contractor has built dozens of biomass, ethanol and natural gas facilities throughout the Pacific Northwest. Its mechanics have also landed a few contracts to help maintain and repair wind turbines awaiting transport at the Port of Longview. The company is now aiming to grow those repair services into a new division that contracts with wind farm operators as well as component manufacturers and suppliers to fix broken turbines.

Vancouver’s Columbia Machine Inc. has just begun to explore the wind energy industry. The manufacturer employs about 375 workers and specializes in building automated equipment that helps large companies stack consumer products such as boxed lawn mowers, beer and bottled water for shipping. But a drop in demand for its other products led the company to launch a subsidiary, called CMS, that seeks out contract manufacturing projects. CMS now employs about 10 full-time workers

Bryan Goodman, vice president of manufacturing for CMS, envisions making control panels, hydraulic units and other electrical and mechanical parts for small to mid-size wind turbine suppliers.

The conference will serve as an orientation to the industry supply chain and help Columbia Machine find the best areas to target, Goodman said.