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Wind power 2010

Three Vancouver firms look to get a piece of burgeoning renewable energy industry

BY PAUL LEONARD | of the VBJ

May 14th, 2010

To hear representatives from three Vancouver companies set to attend the Windpower 2010 trade show in Dallas on May 23-26 talk, it's clear that the fast-growing wind energy industry will not be a cure-all for the region's battered manufacturing sector, which shed an estimated 2,600 jobs in Clark County since the recession began.

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That said, the growing number of wind generating facilities (WGFs) across the globe still represents a golden opportunity for the three attendees, Columbia Machine, JH Kelly and Renewable Energy Composite Solutions, to increase market share in an emerging powerhouse industry.

In order to combine efforts, Columbia River Economic Development Council, together with Business Oregon, Portland Development Commission and other Beaver State agencies, invited the companies to travel to the Windpower event in the hopes of increasing the region's share of a growing manufacturing, repair and maintenance sector for wind generating equipment.

"The goal is to get them orders and to get them integrated into the supply chain," said Jeanie Ashe, CREDC's director of business recruitment.

For RECS director of operations Brad Givens, the goal of this year-old offshoot of Christensen Shipyard at this year's trade show was to connect with big-time players in the wind energy industry, such as General Electric. However, Givens said he realized his firm still had a lot of work ahead. "You don't just show up and say, 'I have a blade design' and expect GE to buy it on the spot," he said. "There's a huge supply chain in wind energy."

RECS will be one of 11 private-sector companies from Oregon and Washington state participating in an exhibit at Windpower 2010, called "Pacific Northwest Wind Team, Your Supplier Connection."

Bryan Goodman, vice president of manufacturing operations at Columbia Machine, planned to tout

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Southwest Washington's mix of east-west highways, ports and location on the Columbia River as a big selling point for wind generating companies looking to cut down shipping costs.

However, for Columbia Machine, as with other Pacific Northwest attendees, the goal was not to become an Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM), but to secure contracts in the fields of contract manufacturing, maintenance and repair of wind generating equipment. "We're open to be a cog in the wheel of the industry as it develops," Goodman said.

According to Goodman, Columbia Machine hopes to augment its contract manufacturing division with new wind industry clients.

Meanwhile, Rob Harris, vice president at general contracting firm JH Kelly, stressed that WGFs were - at least for his company - only "one piece of the puzzle." Aside from chasing wind energy equipment maintenance projects, JH Kelly is currently building a Landfill Gas Generation project in Klickitat County, as well as natural gas-powered energy plants.

"The future of energy isn't going to be just wind," Harris said. "It's going to be a mix of traditional and renewable power facilities."

Though Ashe cited a study showing Washington state as fourth in the U.S. in terms of wind energy generation, she called wind energy "a small piece ... not the total solution" for a region looking for cheaper energy and an abundance of so-called "green jobs" to replace the thousands of relatively high-paying positions lost in the manufacturing sector.

Still, she hoped to boost Southwest Washington's delegation to the next Windpower trade show from three this year to as many as 12 in 2011. "It would be a beautiful thing to be able to do that," Ashe said.



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