

Wright shifts into high gear with big assembly contract

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Monday, July 22, 2013, 7:07 am

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SANTA ROSA — Wright Engineered Plastics is doubling the size of its production facility and adding 100 workers to accommodate greater demand for injection molding of parts as well as assembly of products in the U.S.

Wright is set to relocate in August to a 46,000-square-foot new plant at 3681 N. Laughlin Rd. near Charles M. Schulz–Sonoma County Airport, consolidating from a nearby plant and warehouse. In addition to double-digit revenue growth in recent years and an estimated 25 percent this year, a new customer that required a significant increase in assembly work plus filling a number of ocean-going containers on site necessitated the move, according to Barbara Roberts, chief executive officer.

“We have a number of customers that are expanding their operations and are interested in maintaining manufacturing in the U.S., and new customers have decided to bring manufacturing to the U.S.,” Ms. Roberts said. “It’s very good to hear. I think that many of the (original equipment manufacturers) have discovered the loss of engineering support when manufacturing is moved from being close to R&D efforts. A penny saved on manufacturing overseas is drowned out by the cost of engineering and design changes.”

Because injection-molded plastics production can be light on labor after tooling is in place, it can be done close to the design center, she noted.

More so than onshoring manufacturing for existing products, Wright is seeing increasingly more new products being made in the U.S., rather than outside the country.

“For a while, we were quoting for molding then shipping molded products overseas for assembly,” Ms. Roberts said. “Now, we’re quoting for molding and assembly.”

Small-scale manufacturers already are having Wright do some assembly because of the extra time and transportation cost of sending products overseas.

Wright has been looking as far south as Petaluma for suitable larger production space for a few years. Those plans were accelerated in January, when the Sterling, Va.-based U.S. division of Opterna, whose president lives in the Bay Area, signed up Wright to make large numbers of molded components for new fiber-optics cable television set-top boxes, largely bound for new-infrastructure in foreign markets.

Originally, Wright had proposed to just make the parts and mechanically assemble the boxes, which would go to another plant for threading delicate fiber-optic line into and through the boxes. During product development, the plan shifted to having Wright do both. Contributing to that decision were Wright’s experience in handling optical parts for telecommunications companies plus the facility cleanliness standards required under a ISO 13485 certification for production of medical products.

To ramp up assembly quickly for the Opterna contract, Wright sourced about 100 temporary workers through Sonoma-based The Nelson Companies, and a number of those jobs are being considered to bring in-house next year.

The workforce has expanded to 120 and is set to grow to 160 soon. The company has gone from two shifts to three, including 35 in two assembly shifts.

Existing medical-device customers are bringing more work to Wright with the expanded production capacity, Ms. Robert said. Local customers include TriVascular and small contracts from Medtronic.

Among other local customers are General Dynamics and L-3 Communications, Cyan, Calix, Dell’s local operations that were Turin then Force 10, and Parker Hannifin’s Compumotor division.

The return of more local manufacturing, including telecom-related work, takes 33-year-old Wright Engineered Plastics (707-575-1218, wepmolding.com) [back to where it was as the telecom boom was starting in the mid-1990s](#). At that time, the company contracted to 46 employees as telecom companies took production overseas.

In the June lease deal for Wright’s larger Santa Rosa plant, Shawn Johnson and Brian Keegan of Keegan & Coppin/ONCOR International brokered the deal.

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