



Orion strives to be 'light years ahead'

CEO would like Congress to reward companies going green

BY CHARLIE MATHEWS • HERALD TIMES REPORTER • APRIL 20, 2009

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MANITOWOC — From President Barack Obama to Gov. Jim Doyle to U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin, politicians are touting Orion Energy Systems.

In March, Obama saluted company President and Chief Executive Officer Neal Verfuert in a White House conference promoting clean energy, the creation of "green collar" jobs and the importance of energy efficiency.

But, after announcing last week that its sales wouldn't quite meet stock analysts' expectations, Verfuert has a couple of favors to ask of state and federal officials for the company whose marketing slogan is "Light Years Ahead."

"I'm lobbying our legislators to recognize our Apollo Light Pipe as a 'renewable,'" Verfuert said of the rooftop device that harvests daylight and directs it to the work area of a facility using no electricity.

Verfuert is a bit frustrated by some prospective customers delaying purchases of Orion's energy-efficient lighting fixtures and light pipes as they wait to see if stimulus bills out of Washington or Madison will offer a tax credit or rebate for going green.

He believes the return on investment in Orion's products should convince companies to go forward, with or without public sector credits or rebates.

But many executives, Verfuert said, are overly focused on stock performance in the short run and refrain from capital investments.

On a Wednesday visit to Orion's new \$9 million Technology Center, next to its Mirro Drive manufacturing plant, Baldwin, D-Madison, was

empathetic.

Baldwin, first elected to Congress in 1998, is a member of the House of Representatives' energy and commerce committee and its subcommittee on energy and environment.

Baldwin is helping to draft legislation requiring 25 percent of electricity to be produced by renewable energy by 2025.

Other aspects of new regulations Baldwin said Obama will support are focused on reducing carbon emissions.

"The consensus of the scientific community is that is we are to prevent rising global temperatures, we must reduce carbon (emissions) significantly by the end of the century," Baldwin said.



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Orion Energy Systems President and CEO Neal Verfuert shows U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin the energy-saving Apollo Light Pipe technology manufactured in Manitowoc. Sue Pischke/HTR

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Those who haven't gone green will have to pay to continue their "dirty practices," Baldwin said.

She pledged to consider drafting legislation enabling purchasers of energy-efficient technology the opportunity to retroactively qualify for investment tax credits.

'Curb Appeal' To Fortune 500

Verfuert and his wife, Pat, started Orion on April 1, 1997. The company went public in December 1997 and is traded on the NASDAQ with the stock symbol "OESX," which is the personalized license plate on his black Mustang convertible in the parking lot.

Over the past dozen years, Verfuert and the Orion sales staff have made sales to an increasingly diverse group of customers, both in terms of business sectors and geography.

Lighting fixtures shrink-wrapped and ready for shipment last week had destinations of Pottsville, Pa.; Barrie, Ontario, Canada; Rochelle, Ill.; Nashville, Tenn.; and Curitiba, Brazil, where there is a mammoth PepsiCo bottling plant.

Verfuert said the three-story, 70,000-square-foot Technology Center was designed to have strong "curb appeal" to Fortune 500 companies when representatives visit Orion in Manitowoc.

The building's architectural style features wide, open spaces and sweeping, dramatic curves. Pat Verfuert worked with Plymouth design-builder Jim Pankow to have the interior feature plentiful warm woods rather than sterile metals, Verfuert said.

On Wednesday, Gov. Doyle will speak at the grand opening of the center that serves as Orion's world headquarters and operations center, as well as the nexus for business and educational institutions to learn about energy efficiency technology.

Earlier in the day, Verfuert will have rung the opening bell at NASDAQ in New York City. Orion has rung the bell twice before — on Earth Day in 2008 and on Dec. 31, 2007.

The new building features a state-of-the-art shared loop heating and cooling system to minimize energy use.

Orion's light pipes have been installed on its roof, and the adjoining 260,000-square-foot manufacturing plant is going through a light pipe retrofit.

Between the two Manitowoc facilities, and a sales office in Plymouth where the company was founded, Orion has about 280 employees.

Verfuert shares his energy-efficiency passion with more than adults who might buy products for their company or educational institution.

"We had 50 students — 'Lightbusters' — in here last week," Verfuert told Baldwin. They know simple energy-saving measures, like turning off lights when leaving a room, are the right thing to do, Verfuert said.

'Urban Wind' And Optimism

This year, Orion intends to erect a 280-foot wind tower, with 100-foot blades, on its 30-acre campus.

Verfuert said little line loss of power would be experienced by the "Urban Wind" project with it located next to the manufacturing plant.

Another new energy-saving project involves making ice at night, when electric usage and rates are low, that will then be used to help cool Orion's facilities on warm days.

For Verfuert, it's all part of Orion leading by example with continuing innovations.

"All of our employees right now are going through a series of innovation-creativity training exercises," Verfuert said.

He wants Orion's corporate culture to be one of creativity "and responsibility to our stakeholders. At the top is customers first, then sales and manufacturing, then all others," Verfuert said.

"We want to develop a culture of caring about your job ... this is not just a place to get a paycheck," Verfuert said.

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He remains a long-term optimist, despite the current recession.

"We need good news right now in this country ... what we need in America is a positive attitude," Verfueth said.

"Regardless of this little hiccup in the economy, we will need a way to maintain our standard of living by having abundant, cheap energy and we have solutions that work."

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