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FOLLOW THE SUN 1

Cone Drive's heliostats will help California solar company

TRAVERSE CITY — Components manufactured by Cone Drive Gearing Solutions plant are used around the globe to make food, land aircraft and manufacture steel.

Record-Eagle/Bill O'Brien

Cone Drive's Roberta Wagner displays a demonstration unit of the company's "worm gear" technology that will be used in the world's largest solar thermal-energy project under construction in California.

Now they'll help chase the sun.

Cone Drive teamed with a California-based power company to provide gear boxes for an estimated $2 billion solar-energy plant under construction in the Mojave Desert, the world's largest solar thermal-energy project.

"The potential for solar is huge," said Roberta Wagner, Cone Drive's global business solar unit manager. "BrightSource has a lot of projects in the pipeline that they're intending to build."

Officials at the Traverse City plant learned of the solar project more than two years ago and contacted BrightSource Energy representatives. Cone Drive soon became one of hundreds of parts suppliers for its Ivanpah solarenergy project.

The Ivanpah project is spread across about 3,500 acres of California desert, just a few miles from the Nevada border. It will be comprised of three separate solar-thermal power plants and, once completed, will generate around 370 megawatts of electricity that will almost double the amount of solar-thermal electricity produced in the U.S.

It's expected to produce enough green energy to serve approximately 140,000 homes.

The solar plant will utilize thousands of computercontrolled mirrors, called heliostats, that reflect sunlight to heat a boiler that generates steam piped to a conventional turbine that creates electricity.

Cone Drive will manufacture gear boxes that attach to the mirrors to track the sun's path. Gear box production is under way, and shipping will begin this summer.

BrightSource spokesman Keely Wachs said accuracy and reliability of Cone Drive's components made the company a perfect fit for heliostats that will track the sun's rays.

"It's very, very accurate in how it tracks the path of the sun," Wachs said. "We need drives that can match that required level of accuracy."

Wagner said Cone Drive plans to hire about 20 employees to help handle the extra workload, a 12 percent increase from its 163-worker staff in Traverse City. Officials wouldn't disclose the contract's value, but there's potential for significantly more work, since BrightSource plans to build more than a dozen new solar installations over the next six years.

Wagner's involvement included two trips to the Middle East to study BrightSource's experimental plant in Israel. She also attended Ivanpah's October groundbreaking.

"It was a very historic and unique event," Wagner said.

Cone Drive is an 85-yearold company founded in Detroit. Its Traverse City plant on 12th Street opened in 1950, rebuilt from bricks from a Detroitarea bomb plant dismantled after World War II.

It later was purchased by Ex-Cell-O Corp., which sold out to Textron in the 1980s. Textron also acquired