



The Green Bounce: New Interest in Renewable Energy Firms

By Eric Walter

Rising oil prices don't seem to be putting much of a damper on William West's business.

"We have seen an upswing," said the president of Gates-based Precision Design Systems, which provides testing services for companies developing fuel cell prototypes.

Many of his staff, in the past year have gone from working less than 40 hours per week to about 60, West said. He's even thinking of bringing on three more full-time engineers.

The shift, he said, started at roughly the same time gas prices began their rapid ascent -- now hovering above \$4 per gallon.

"I can't necessarily say it's because of higher fuel prices," he said, "but I suspect there is a relationship"

Some statistics seem to bear West out. According to the United Nation's 2008 Global Trends in Sustainable Energy report, global investment in green or renewable energy sources rose by 60 percent in 2007 to \$148.4 billion. Much of that growth, the report notes, occurred in China and the United States.

Another report from the U.S. Department of Energy shows actual renewable energy consumption in the United States decreased by 1 percent in 2007, due largely to droughts that affected hydroelectric generation. Energy consumption in technologies that power the transportation sector, such as biofuel, however, increased by about 30 percent.

The numbers don't come as a surprise to West, who is seeing a greater push from many of the companies he works with, both large and small, to move their products more quickly in the development and commercialization pipeline. The race is on now to get their products to market, he said.

Tom Currie, vice president of sales and co-founder of Pittsford- based Solar Sentry Corp.,

said his firm also is experiencing an uptick in interest. His three-year-old company develops tools to monitor power generation from photovoltaic cells, which can cut the costs of solar power generation.

"The interest is there," Currie said. "I think there is a lot of hope as to what renewable sources can do to in terms of providing relief to oil use."

John Olenick, president of Alden-based EnRG Inc., which manufactures ceramic parts used in renewable and ultra-efficient energy applications, said he is planning to hire two more employees to handle increased inquiries and orders.

"I expect this to be part of a longer-term trend," he said.

Nabil Nasr, director of Rochester Institute of Technology's Golisano Institute for Sustainability, agrees, but said recently he expects growth will be uneven in the short term. So far, he said, prices for commercial electricity remain relatively stable. Continuing escalation of the price of fossil fuels, however, has and will continue to make innovation in the transportation sector a particularly hot area, he said.

Given the region's highly educated workforce and the presence of companies such as Delphi, Nasr said fuel cell development is a particularly promising avenue of growth for the greater Rochester region.

James Winebrake, chair of RIT's public policy program and a specialist in green energy policy matters, said some factors continue to hold back widespread adoption of renewable energy- powered vehicles, not the least of which is a lack of commercial infrastructure to support fuel cell- or biofuel-powered vehicles. Such hurdles won't last forever, however, he said, and many municipalities, school districts and large corporations already see the potential for growth, he said.

Far more research and development will have to be done fuel cells, for instance, are an affordable alternative to petroleum products in the marketplace, West said. As technology improves, the economies of scale generated by increased use will lower prices on the many new technologies now under development.

"This is kind of a fun place to be right now," Currie said.

Originally published by Eric Walter.

(c) 2008 Daily Record (Rochester, NY). Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning. All rights Reserved.

Story from REDORBIT NEWS:
<http://www.redorbit.com/news/display/?id=1484571>

Published: 2008/07/18 09:01:06 CDT

© RedOrbit 2005