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## Reaching for the sky: Wind turbine plant nears completion

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — San Angelo's economic white knight is nearing completion on the northeastern outskirts of the city.

Clad in light industrial gray, the Martifer-Hirschfeld wind tower fabrication plant sits low to the ground in contrast to its products, which will reach to the sky trying to catch the wind. On land that was a vacant field just eight months ago, the factory is now fine-tuning specialized machinery that will be crafting the massive parts of wind towers the size of California redwoods by the third quarter of this year, the company says.

Martifer representatives are still being cautious about pegging a date for the first tower to be shipped out of the plant — in the original announcement in September 2008, it was forecast by the company to be in production by the end of 2009 — but now the fabrication machinery is in place, and scores of skilled workers are being trained, said Martifer comptroller Silvio Teixeira.

"It takes some time; these are very complex machines," Teixeira said. "There's a lot of technology involved."

People from Italy, other areas of the U.S., and Portugal, Martifer's home country, where it operates a plant similar to the San Angelo operation, are putting the machinery through its operating paces, and skilled Martifer employees from its Portugal plant are coming to San Angelo to provide additional training.

The \$30 million factory covers 170,000 square feet in a 32-acre setting west of where the Old Ballinger Highway meets U.S. 277, across the road from the Texas Pacifico rail line, which eventually will be used to ship out the towers.

With approximately 120 employees, the Phase I operation won't crack the top 20 employers in the county, but the jobs are expected to pay well — Martifer in 2009 said the average salary for the plant workers would be about \$31,500 a year, which would make the annual payroll just under \$4 million.

Each tower will be fabricated to order, Teixeira said. The pieces begin as steel plate arriving at the west end of the building and, after being cut, curved, welded, cleaned and painted, emerge at the other end as finished sections of wind towers, an average piece being about 100 feet long and about 10 feet in diameter. The elevation of most wind towers is around 300 feet, which will require three sections to be assembled at the wind farm site.

### **Industry strong**

Wind energy has been presented as a strong emerging industry, but it's not bombproof. In January, TowerTech in Abilene laid off 15 workers after having let go 25 in July 2009, reducing its original workforce by more than 20 percent. Last year, plants across the country idled workers as orders for wind towers were postponed or canceled. But the growth of wind power in America has been astounding by any measure: According to The Energy Information Administration, wind generation capacity grew from 14 million megawatt-hours to 52 million megawatt-hours from 2004 to 2008 while every other form of renewable energy output remained static. The deceleration in building new wind generation projects is mainly a symptom of the prevailing economic

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conditions, said Mike Giberson, a professor at Texas Tech University and an economist and energy industry analyst.

Financing, the general economy and the lag in building transmission lines to carry the electricity generated by wind farms, which often are built in remote locations, all are temporarily dampening new wind farm construction, he said, "but I think they are short term things."

As for Martifer-Hirschfeld, the market "will easily absorb 200 or 400 wind towers a year," he said.

Transportation for the massive towers had to be addressed before the plant could go ahead. The above-grade steel trusses on the Texas Pacifico rail bridge over the Colorado River near Ballinger would not allow loads of that width to pass over the bridge.

A new bridge, said Texas Department of Transportation spokeswoman Karen Threlkeld, will not be finished sooner than December. It will be built near the site of the old bridge, requiring a minimum of track realignment, she said.

Wind towers produced at the plant will be shipped by truck until the rail line upgrades, including the bridge, are finished, according to a statement by Martifer-Hirschfeld's John Wittig in late 2009.

### **At a glance**

Martifer-Hirschfeld San Angelo wind turbine tower factory

Cost: Phase I — \$30 million; Phase II — \$10 million

Size: 170,000 square feet

Location: 32 acres on Old Ballinger Highway

Number of employees: Phase 1 — About 120; Phase II — 225

Annual payroll: About \$4 million

Production targets: Phase I — 200 wind turbine towers per year; Phase II — 400 per year.

Federal tax credits approved: \$3.5 million

Texas Workforce Commission training grant: \$600,000

Number of alternative energy companies that expressed an interest in San Angelo in 2007: 13

Chamber of Commerce code name for Martifer: Project Panza, probably a reference to Sancho Panza, the character who acts as squire to the mad knight who tilts at windmills in Cervantes' novel Don Quixote.

Martifer Group consolidated revenues in 2008: \$1.25 billion

Martifer Group employees: 3,000 (2008)

Hirschfeld Industries consolidated revenues in 2008: \$282 million

Hirschfeld Industries employees: 900 (2008)