

Wabi Iron & Steel locked into Trent-Severn Waterway work

Jul 13, 2018 2:00 PM by: Ian Ross



Marine work may be a future opportunity for Wabi Iron & Steel after landing a contract to work on lock components for the Trent-Severn Waterway rehabilitation.

New Liskeard fabricator [Wabi Iron & Steel](#) has landed a sizeable contract in the rehabilitation of the Trent-Severn Waterway.

The 65-employee company has secured a \$1.6-million contract to manufacture the replacements for 13 sluice valves on some of the recreational locks on the central Ontario waterway.

Wabi is working through a major southern Ontario design-build contractor that was awarded one of four large bundles of work in Ottawa's \$3-billion rehabilitation of the 386-kilometre long network of locks, bridges and dams under Parks Canada control.

The company is making the replacements for the original grey cast-iron valves that were installed. The new components will be made with ductile iron.

"They're like a huge toilet valve, really," said Wabi president Stan Gorzalcznski, in describing the components they will be re-engineering and casting based on century-old mechanical drawings.

"That's what makes this a unique thing. The originals were supplied by a foundry in the UK (United Kingdom) about a hundred years ago. There's really no OEM (original equipment manufacturer) to go to and say we want to reorder these valves, and so we're starting from scratch."

The project will involve both the casting capabilities of the foundry division to shape the shell structure of the valve body, and the fabrication side of Wabi to make the valve spool structure.

"The whole assembly when it's all together would be about six feet in diameter and eight feet tall," said Gorzalcznski.

"It's a sizeable chunk of metal...with a valve opening of about five feet."

In mid-July, the company was in the process of finishing the tooling patterns before they could start casting.

The first batch of valves will be delivered in September, the rest in November.

"It's kind of way out of our traditional marketplace," said Gorzalcznski, who mentioned they were invited to bid through Parks Canada.

"They seemed to know about us and wanted the work to come our way. We made sure we were on the bidders list because we had no idea this was happening."

"One of the attractions of Wabi was the fact that we are able to fabricate on-site as well as produce castings," added Steve Hill, vice-president of business development.

"There are not a lot of organizations that are able to do that."

The work for Parks Canada is a departure from Wabi's traditional bread-and-butter work in the mining industry.

The 111-year-old company is a major mining equipment supplier known for fabricating skips, cages, material handling equipment, loading chutes and ore cars and exporting them to operations across Canada and into Central and South America.

This foray into marine work is one area they are targeting to expand and diversify its customer mix.

"One of the things we're trying to do at Wabi is add value to the company through an expanded marketplace. It's just another avenue that uses castings. It's still a very valid process for making

machine parts, but you have to hunt a little harder to find people that actually need castings nowadays.”

For many years, Hill said Wabi has produced castings for Essar Steel Algoma in Sault Ste. Marie.

“We decided if we can do that for them successfully we should set our sights further afield.”

Both men are hopeful this job will lead to more work with other heritage canals under the Parks Canada umbrella that employ similar technologies.

The other side of their diversification push is in the domestic steel industry.

“The steel industry is waking up in Canada,” said Gorzalcznski.

“It’s kind of odd to say that with the latest tariff war but the steel industry is alive and well.”

He pointed to Stelco in Hamilton – restructured and under new ownership – returning primary steel production to the former Hilton Works by restarting a dormant blast furnace.

Hill added Wabi has enjoyed a fair amount of success doing work for southern Ontario steel mills because of their ability to engineer and combine with their castings to fabricate and assemble some components for them.

This comes at a bewildering time in Canada-U.S. trade relations when Canadian steelmakers are under pressure by the Trump administration that imposed a 25 per cent tariff in June on steel brought across the U.S. border.

It was quickly followed by matching Canadian retaliatory countermeasures.

Gorzalcznski said Wabi is feeling the early pain but is undeterred by what’s happening on the trade war front.

He said there are many American original equipment manufacturers that they supply to, and while they have experienced any export constraints, they’ve witnessed some cost escalation on the import side, specifically with raw steel like the plate and structural shapes they use.

“There’s not much we can do about it so we’re trying to shore up the Canadian market as much as we can, and looking a little bit aboard seeing if there are any benefits to the (Canada-European Union trade agreement) that we have.”

Trade battles aside, Gorzalcznski said Wabi is clipping along at a brisk pace, thanks mainly to a “revival” in the mining industry that’s keeping the company operating at overcapacity in some areas.

The backlog of work is particularly high on the foundry side.

However, he added, they're struggling to source more skilled people particularly at the general machinists and engineer positions. "They're very difficult to find."

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