Pressed into service

Oilgear expands its business by rebuilding a huge machine

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It was delivered Tuesday on a 199-foot trailer shadowed by police escorts.

Almost immediately, Oilgear Co. will begin rebuilding the extrusion press that came from Tennessee and is bound for a manufacturing plant in northern Michigan.

When finished, the press will weigh about 350,000 pounds - nearly as heavy as five Boeing 717 airliners.

Rebuilding the 39-year-old machine represents a new line of work for Oilgear, a manufacturer of pumps, hydraulic systems and other power gear for industrial machinery and construction equipment.

"It's our hope that we could do two or three of these a year," said Ted Versteeg, an executive vice president at the 87-year-old Milwaukee company.

"This is bringing back to Milwaukee the type of business that the city was based on. It's part of our heritage," Versteeg added.

Extrusion presses are used to make hundreds of products, from automotive parts to aluminum window frames. This 2,500-ton press can make metal parts about 9 inches in diameter and is a midsize machine in the extrusion industry.

Oilgear

Oilgear Co. took delivery of an extrusion press at its Milwaukee plant Tuesday and will start rebuilding the 39-year-old machine. Once completed, the press will be delivered to its final destination at Superior Extrusion Inc. in Gwinn, Mich. An extrusion press is used to make metal parts.

The press shapes material by forcing it through a die. Extruded material emerges as an elongated piece with the same profile as the die opening.

"It's like a giant Play-Doh machine," said Sam Harkness, marketing manager with the William L. Bonnell Co., a 103-year-old metal extrusion firm based in Georgia.

Most machines weighing 350,000 pounds spend their entire lives in one place.

Oilgear has rebuilt presses in the past, but the work was done on-site where the equipment was used.

The company brought this press to Milwaukee to be rebuilt because it wanted more control over the process.

"It's much easier to do things, like the piping, in our shop. There are some definite advantages for us, plus we are keeping more people in Milwaukee," Versteeg said.

The press spent several decades at a Tennessee manufacturing plant that recently closed.

After the closure, the press was sold to a manufacturer near Lansing, Mich.

But it was never put in service there because the buyer encountered business problems.

The press was sold again to Superior Extrusion Inc., a Michigan manufacturer located in the Upper Peninsula.

Superior hired Oilgear to rebuild the press before taking delivery of the machine this fall.

"This is a big deal for us. It could triple the size of our business," said Superior President Dan Amberg.

Five months of work

It will take Oilgear about five months to rebuild the press, including giving it a fresh coat of paint.

Getting the machine to Milwaukee was a task in itself.

Tens of thousands of pounds in parts had to be stripped off so that it could meet road weight limits. To protect the roads, the press had to be moved while there was still frost on the ground.

The press is only about 27 feet in length but, because of its weight, had to be carried in sections on the 199-foot trailer.

Highway ramps had to be closed to accommodate the huge trailer.

Some extrusion presses operating in the United States were built in the 1940s. Many of the smaller ones are no longer being used because they're inefficient.

The extrusion industry has been affected by the downturn in consumer spending and U.S. manufacturing.

"When the economy is good, the industry is good. When the economy tanks, the industry tanks," Harkness said

Company officials declined to say what the rebuilding project will cost. But when the press is rebuilt, it will be as good as a new machine costing about $3 million, according to Versteeg.

"It will increase the productivity of this press substantially from what it was able to do," he said.

Oilgear will rebuild the press using its own employees.

"A fair amount of engineering is required," Versteeg said. "We have the people to do everything on this press, but we might bring some folks in from the outside because we are busy in other areas."