

Oil Boom Manufacturing Jumpstarts Washington County, Ga.

S. Heather Duncan, Associated Press Writer

MACON, Ga. (AP) — The manufacture of booms to help clean up the Gulf oil spill has become a boon to Washington County.

The booms manufactured by Meltblown Technologies are used to corral oil floating on the surface and can be linked to form miles of barriers to absorb oil and prevent its spread. Company Vice President George Gonzalez said the company can't meet the demand, even while producing five times more than before the April 20 Deepwater Horizon explosion. The British Petroleum spill left crude oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico at an estimated rate of 35,000 to 60,000 barrels a day.

"It's unbelievable," Gonzalez said. "We went from 45 employees to 135 employees in the last 30 days," and he said the company will likely decide in the next week whether to add 100 more jobs and lease additional space in Sandersville.

"It's such an awful oil spill, but there's no end in sight to the need for what we make," he said. "Nothing's ever been this large. It's such a demand, and it's very tough."

The additional jobs are huge for Washington County, where the unemployment rate at the end of May was 15.4 percent, said Theo McDonald, executive director of the Development Authority of Washington County.

"If Meltblown improves that number by two or three points, it'll be great," he said.

Washington County, long reliant on kaolin mining and refining jobs, was already suffering from that industry's long decline. The recession only worsened the situation, McDonald said.

The addition of 100 jobs has a "tremendous impact," given that the county's work force is just 8,500, McDonald said. "It's very, very meaningful for us."

Meltblown relocated to Sandersville four years ago from Magee, Miss., with the help of the development authority. McDonald is now showing company officials three potential expansion locations in the city's industrial district. Gonzalez said the company might also decide to further expand within its current building.

Meltblown is one of only about seven companies in the United States that manufacture polypropylene booms, Gonzalez said, estimating that his company is the second or third largest supplier of booms to the Gulf cleanup.

Meltblown is producing almost 400,000 feet of booms a week, he said, operating

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four shifts seven days a week. Sometimes the product is being shipped out all night because Meltblown has trouble getting enough available truckers during the day, Gonzalez said.

Normally, the company's biggest selling products are pads and rolls that soak up oil, with booms being made from the scraps. Now, booms make up the majority of their production, Gonzalez said.

Booms are usually made from the polypropylene trimmed from the edges of the absorbent pads that Meltblown manufactures. The trimmings are chopped, then blown into a sausage shape with a clip at the end so they can be linked together, Gonzalez explained.

To get enough polypropylene, the company is buying scraps from other industries, such as manufacturers of adhesive bandages, Gonzalez said. It's also chopping up the material itself instead of making pads first.

Although BP approached Meltblown directly to buy booms, Gonzalez said the company did not want to undercut the distributors that are its long-term customers. Instead, the company sells to its distributors, who sell to contractors on the BP cleanup.

Meltblown has expanded its production from three lines to seven and is strongly considering adding 10 more, Gonzalez said. Other companies are expanding too, increasing competition for new machinery. Components like O-rings and even rope have also become scarce, he said.

As the oil spill cleanup progresses, demand is likely to shift back to pads and rolls for protecting beaches and soaking up oil there, Gonzalez said. The demand for the company's products could remain high for years, depending on how long the oil spill cleanup takes, he said.

It's unclear how long the added Sandersville jobs will continue after that time. But Gonzalez said Meltblown was working on a large long-term contract for booms and related equipment even before the spill, and if that works out, the current employees would likely retain their jobs long term, he said.

McDonald said he anticipates that demand for Meltblown's products will remain elevated above past levels even after the Gulf crisis, because companies will keep more oil recovery materials on hand to be prepared for future emergencies.

"It's a terrible situation, but perhaps the company and folks from Washington County can help make an impact on cleaning up the oil spill," McDonald said.

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