

Toyota Start Of Production Draws Near

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BLUE SPRINGS, Miss. (AP) — At the 2 million-square-foot Toyota Motor Manufacturing Mississippi plant, the first Corollas have already been made.

But they're not for sale just yet.

The test cars are works in progress, allowing team members — Toyota's term for its employees — to put their knowledge and training to use in anticipation of the long-awaited day when the first production-ready, sellable Corollas roll off the line.

In fact, in just a few weeks, TMMMS will have a "line-off" ceremony to mark the official start of production at the plant.

It's an event Northeast Mississippi has anticipated eagerly for more than four years. And the project had some changes along the way.

Originally, the plant was to open in late 2009 or early 2010 to produce the Highlander SUV. In mid-2008, Toyota switched gears and said it would build the popular Prius hybrid instead, pushing the plant's opening date to late 2010.

Then in December 2008, with the global economic crisis blooming, Toyota said it would delay the opening of the plant indefinitely, at least until conditions improved.

Finally, in June of last year, the company said it was resuming operations — and building the Corolla instead, with an eye toward opening this fall.

And when Toyota Mississippi does churn out its first vehicle, a new economic era officially begins in the region.

"Everyone I've talked to is anxious and waiting with high anticipation the start of production for Toyota," said David Rumbarger, president and CEO of Tupelo's Community Development Foundation

Long the bastion of furniture manufacturing in the state, Northeast Mississippi will be building cars, along with couches, for the first time.

While Toyota hasn't said officially when production begins, state and local officials don't doubt it will happen before the year ends.

According to Whit Hughes, deputy director of the Mississippi Development Authority, "We're confident that all is on schedule for the start of production in the near future. ... We could not be more enthusiastic about things being on track at Blue Springs and the start of production."

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Emily Holland, external affairs specialist for TMMMS, said, "Construction, installation, hiring and training are all on track, and we look forward to starting production later this year."

Some 40,000 people have applied for jobs at TMMMS, which now employs about 950 workers. About 600 more will be hired by the end of the year.

"To date, we have been very pleased with the quality of team members we have been able to attract," said David Copenhaver, vice president of administration at the plant.

And many of the employees who have been hired so far are local faces.

"Ninety percent of hourly team members are from Mississippi and 42 percent of hourly team members are from Pontotoc, Union and Lee counties," Holland said.

The plant will run two shifts for production and skilled maintenance workers, from 6:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. to 3:15 a.m.

Holland said one of two shifts has been hired, with hiring ongoing for the second.

The hiring won't stop after December.

Toyota Mississippi will employ 2,000 workers once the plant is fully operational, expected sometime next spring. And at optimal output, the plant will be able to produce a vehicle about every 90 seconds, or 150,000 vehicles a year.

In addition, eight companies have so far said they will be suppliers for TMMMS, adding another 1,500 to 2,000 jobs.

Three Northeast Mississippi suppliers — Auto Parts Manufacturing Mississippi in Baldwyn, Toyota Boshoku Mississippi in Dorsey, Diversity-Vuteq in New Albany and Blue Springs — have hired 500 workers so far, and look to hire 400 more.

Toyota itself has invested \$800 million in Toyota Mississippi, and MDA's Hughes said the company has been a good partner with the state.

"Together, we've worked through some challenges," he said. "But it's been a matter-of-fact process with open, direct and clear communication.

"At the end of the day, we have shared interests. We want them to be as successful as possible and as a result, we'll be the beneficiaries of the positive economic engine from Toyota and its suppliers."

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