Hope for the nuclear industry? NuVision's Brian Beley's got it

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JUL 19, 2018 | 8:28 AM

Brian Beley has just returned from a two-week tour of Asia — a long way to go for a sales call. The trip was intended to plant seeds rather than sign contracts.

To the Japanese, he brought the promise of keeping nuclear reactors cool without power. To Korean interests, he talked of making pipe welds last longer. In China, he laid it all out —everything that his company, South Side-based NuVision Engineering, has thought up during its 48 years in existence.

“China’s interested in everything we do,” Mr. Beley, NuVision’s new CEO said.

International work makes up more than half of the company’s revenue. And it’s expected to grow, he said.

Mr. Beley is remarkably upbeat about nuclear work, including new nuclear construction, even in the face of a string of discouraging turns for the industry. The past few years have seen uneconomic U.S. nuclear plants announce plans to retire early, as well as two new Westinghouse reactors in South Carolina abandoned after a decade and billions of dollars spent on construction.

Cranberry-based Westinghouse Electric Co. is one of NuVision’s significant and oldest clients. Both Mr. Beley and his predecessor, Van Walker, came from there. The Westinghouse bankruptcy, which cast a shadow over the already dim prospects of a nuclear renaissance in the U.S., has not impacted NuVision, Mr. Beley said.

“There’re still a lot of people working at Westinghouse and at other small nuclear companies in Pittsburgh,” Mr. Beley stressed.

“They’re still making money,” he said. “I mean, they’re OK.”

NuVision’s ranks have expanded and shrunk over the years, currently hovering around 30 employees.

Having changed hands several times over its lifespan, the company was acquired last year by United Kingdom-based Carr's Group Plc, which saw the Pittsburgh firm's hydraulic arm business as a complement to one of its German subsidiaries that manufactures electronic arms.

Carr's called the deal an avenue to getting a "foothold" in the U.S. and, according to its annual report, paid $20 million for NuVision, with $8.5 million contingent on meeting certain performance goals over the first three years.

NuVision's sales effort has been aggressive over the past decade, and it's starting to bear fruit, Mr. Beley said.

Have an operating nuclear power plant on your hands? NuVision can sell you a clasp to ease the pressure on your pipe welds.

Need to decontaminate the pipes in your plant? NuVision can do that with its patented abrasive sponge.

Have a tank full of radioactive sludge? The company has a way to loosen it from the walls and suction it up, freeing workers from the dirty task. From there, one of its hydraulic arms can transfer the waste into a container and in the future — if the R&D pans out as planned — the canister can be compressed to a tenth of its initial size.

NuVision's front office near SouthSide Works is as nondescript as the jumble of words that engineering companies use to describe what they do. (NuVision offers "high added-value, effective and affordable engineering solutions.")

Corporate banners display pictures of giant steel drums crusted with radioactive gunk and of an Army-green rover lifting a rocket on a beach in Israel with one of NuVision's hydraulic arms.

But in the back is a large open lab stacked with robotic arms, pipeline cutouts, and boxes bearing the names of every commercial nuclear power plant that NuVision has worked in.

The nuclear business is "picking up again," Mr. Beley said.

Utilities in the U.S. have completed upgrades mandated by nuclear regulators' review of what happened during the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi meltdown when a tsunami devastated the Japanese nuclear plant, including the diesel generators that were supposed to provide backup power for cooling.

"Now, they're starting to look at capital improvements to their plants," he said.

Here, NuVision sees another opening.

In April, the company got word that it won a $3 million funding opportunity with the U.S. Department of Energy to develop a mechanism to keep nuclear reactor cores from melting down in case of a total loss of power.

NuVision has sketched out a concept for a device that would hook up to parts of existing plants and use natural circulation to keep the fuel cooled.

And, improbably, the company is even dipping its toe into new (sort of) nuclear construction.

It has signed an agreement with Canadian project management firm SNC-Lavalin Group Inc. to help complete the long-abandoned Bellefonte plant

in Alabama.

Commissioned and built by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1970s, Bellefonte was more than halfway done when it was canceled in 1988. One of the two units was estimated to be 90 percent complete.

Since then, parts have been sold and some are worse for the wear, but it's more than just the bones that remain, Mr. Beley said. Still, SNC-Lavalin has told him there would be two years of engineering work before construction can resume.

Mr. Beley visited the plant several years ago at the request of TVA, which announced in 2011 that it was going to finish the project. A few years later, the utility abandoned the effort again and auctioned it off.

In 2016, real estate developer Franklin Haney bid $111 million for the project and was given two years to come up with the money.

He's seeking U.S. Department of Energy loan guarantees to finance its completion. The Wall Street Journal reported in May that Mr. Haney had enlisted President Donald Trump's indicted former personal attorney Michael Cohen to solicit funding from Qatari investors.

SNC-Lavalin told World Nuclear News that if the deal doesn't close by December, its agreement with Mr. Haney is dissolved.

To skeptics who point to utilities that have called off new nuclear construction projects, saying they're too expensive, Mr. Beley countered that a partially completed plant is a different animal all together.

"The risk on this plant is much lower than building a plant from the very beginning," he said.

Getting the Bellefonte project might shift the majority of NuVision's work back to the U.S., Mr. Beley said.

But as the salesman knows, he said, nothing is final without a contract in hand. For now, there are a lot of seeds in the ground.

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First Published July 19, 2018, 8:28am