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UNTERRIFIED DEMOCRAT

Vol. 144 • Issue 22 | 14 Pages | Wednesday, December 1, 2010 | Linn, Missouri | Price: 75¢ including sales tax

Harvey Buhr of Bonnots Mill stands next to a tires-to-energy processor that on Friday will begin a journey to a giant East Coast tire retread plant. The tire company plans to have the first two of four giant processors in operation with 15 months.

Hitec moving tires-to-energy processor to North Carolina

By RALPH VOSS
Unterrified Democrat Staff

On Friday of this week, Harvey Buhr's Hitec LLC will be embarking on what appears to be the start of an incredible journey. The Bonnots Mill company will send one of its tires-to-energy processors to North Carolina where, by the end of next week, it will be set up and running at the largest off-the-road (OTR) retread plant east of the Mississippi River.

Assuming the processor performs as successfully as it has so many times in the past, within 15 months a plant with two giant processors capable of handling eight-foot diameter tires are expected to be in operation at the RDH Tire Company retread plant in Cleveland, N.C. According to current plans, two more units are to be delivered shortly after the first two become operational.

"The reason we're taking this processor down there now is to turn out a product (the oil, gas, carbon and steel) so RDH can establish a market for them," Buhr explained this week. "We will also use this smaller processor to train their operators and as a demo unit for the financial and regulatory people to see."

Buhr's process is unique in that no one else is doing a whole tire without first cutting or shredding the tire. This feature saves a lot of energy. The Hitec system breaks down tires by putting them into a large steel chamber and heating the tires under a vacuum. Energy from outside the chamber is initially used to heat the tires and the energy in the tires then takes over and completes the conversion into gas, oil, carbon and steel. Under the Hitec system 75% of the energy is recovered, while the remaining 25% of the energy is consumed in the process.

RDH's goal is to have a full plant running within one year after completion of the three-month test phase. Buhr and employees of Industrial Enterprises, Inc. – Buhr's mechanical manufacturing arm located in Jefferson City – have been in North Carolina in recent weeks getting their facility set up to handle the processor that will be leaving Bonnots Mill this week. It is this preparation that will allow the processor to be up and running in only one week's time.

The processor that will be taken to North Carolina comes with a touch-screen process control that is designed to make operation of the processor fully automatic. The controls will come with what are called "recipes" for handling the various kinds of rubber that will be processed. For example, a whole tire will be handled in a different manner from rubber strips, which in turn will be different from "buffings," the small parts that are "buffed" off a retread tire as the final step in the manufacturing process. One plant may need as many as 15 or 20 recipes to deal with the various types and sizes of rubber materials that may be processed at that plant.

The pilot processor that will be sent to North Carolina has seven sensors that are used to measure the temperature at various locations throughout the unit. In addition to the temperature, the control will show the pressure inside the processor and whether the various pumps and burners are on or off.

On Monday of this week the processor was put through its paces one more time before it is prepared for the move to the East Coast And one more time it performed

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without incident, turning almost 1,000 pounds of tire buffings into oil, gas and carbon. (There was no residual steel because there is little or no steel in buffings.) The process Monday took less than eight hours.

The road from central Missouri to North Carolina has taken almost a quarter century to travel. In the mid-1980s Buhr was experimenting with converting sawdust and wood slabs into energy. It would be some 15 years later that he would zero in on tires because of the greater amount of energy they contain, Within the past five years the focus was directed to OTR tires because of the high quality of the materials that went into them and stood to be recovered from them. The OTR tires, for example, contain more natural rubber than car tires, which are made primarily with synthetic rubber.

People in Buhr's operation are rightfully excited about the prospects for their companies. But it is not only these people that see the benefits of the Hitec process. A tire industry online publication in its fall issue featured Hitec and talked about the advantages of the Hitec system and the fact Hitec will install a processor at the RDH plant in North Carolina.

For years Hitec has passed almost unnoticed beneath the radar screen. It would appear those days of near-anonymity have come to an end.