

LM WIND POWER: 265 jobs to be created in Gaspé

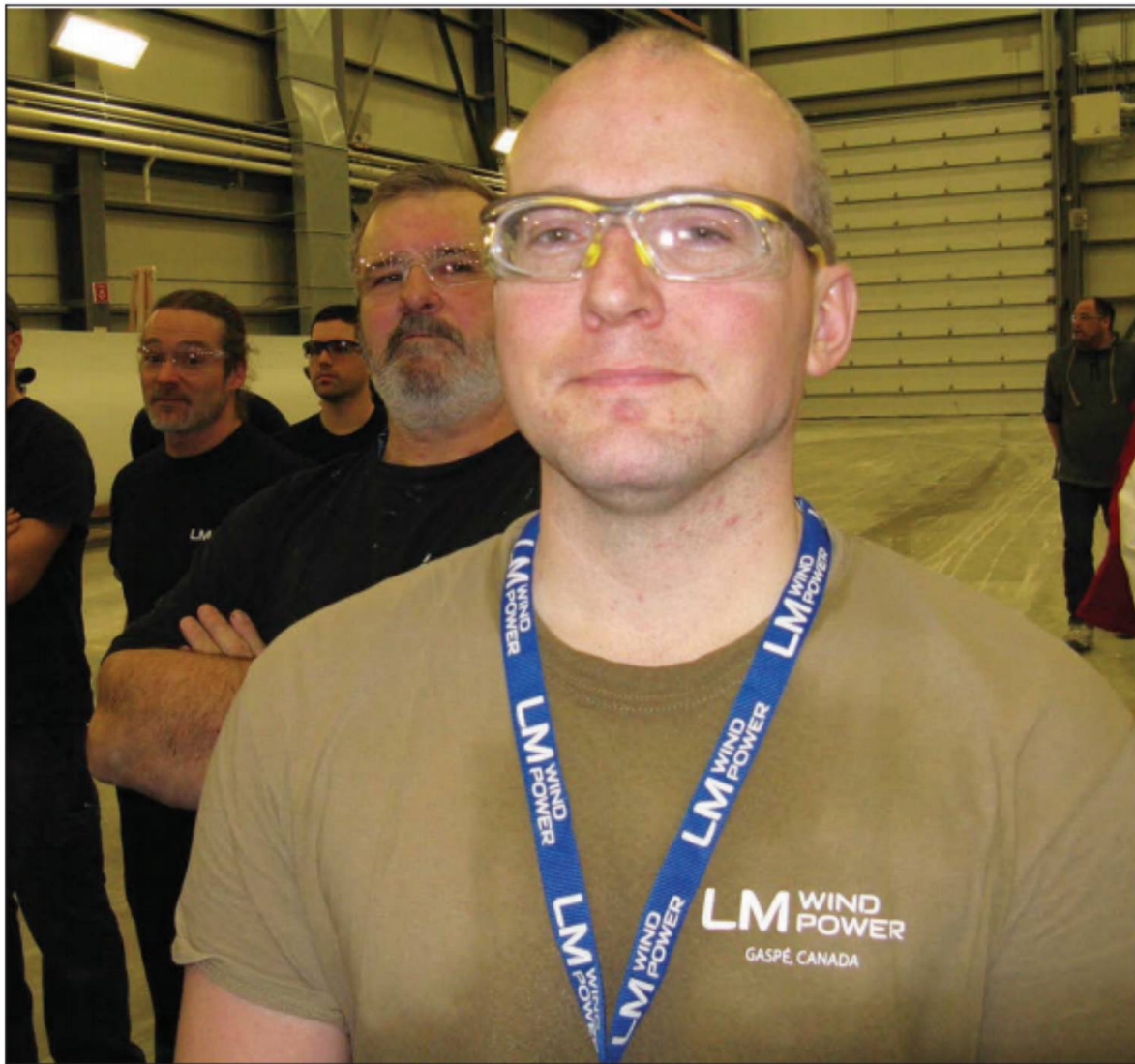
Geneviève Gélinas

GASPÉ: – Less than one year ago, the 185 employees of LM Wind Power in Gaspé feared that the blade manufacturing plant would close, due to a lack of contracts. Today, the business is investing more than \$12 million in an expansion in order to supply the American market. The workforce at the plant will increase from its current number of 300 employees to 450 by early 2018.

On January 13, the Danish multinational announced that the plant's surface area will increase by 40%, to approximately 2,700 square meters. Excavation work started in November. The new part should be ready by the end of June.

Between July 2016 and the beginning of 2018, 265 jobs will have been created. With 450 workers, LM Wind Power will become the largest private employer on the Gaspé Coast, ahead of fisheries processing plants and Saint-Omer's Construction LFG.

LM has been hiring new employees since last summer. They presently have 300 workers, who share two shifts, seven days a week. These days, the plant is integrating about 15 new workers per



Photos: G. Gélinas

Martin Laflamme came back to the Gaspé to work at LM Wind Power.

week.

The Quebec Government lent the company \$4.3 million for its expansion and provided LM with a grant of about \$1.4 million to train the new employees. Three ministers, including Economy, Science

and Innovation Minister, Dominique Anglade, were in Gaspé on January 13 for the announcement.

100% exports

"The American market

needs blades. 100% of our production goes to the United States," says Alexandre Boulay, the plant manager, who refuses to give more details about the contracts that justify the expansion, except that it's for the United States.

According to our information, since September 19, the Gaspé employees have been manufacturing 42-meter blades for General Electric. The Gaspé blades will replace components that have reached the end of their useful life on already existing windmills in the United States, including Texas.

The exports will keep the plant operating "for several years," states Mr. Boulay. "We would like to see the domestic market start up again in five years," he adds.

The Quebec energy policy doesn't plan to order new wind energy projects before Hydro-Québec's surplus has



Between July 2016 and the beginning of 2018, the LM employees will have seen 265 new colleagues join them.

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decreased. Last spring this announcement plunged LM and other components manufacturers, which had first settled on the Gaspé Coast because of the domestic demand into uncertainty.

At the beginning of 2016, "it wasn't clear how we could keep the jobs in Gaspé," says the chief executive officer of LM Wind Power, Marc de Jong, who was present at the announcement through videoconference.

"I hope that you will help create wind projects in Canada and particularly in Québec. It's essential for the long term future of our plant," Mr. de Jong said to the ministers.

By train

LM's blades are transported by truck to New Richmond and then loaded on rail cars to reach their destination by train. "We're 250 kilometers away from the (nearest fit) rail line. If it was closer, it would be a competitive advantage," stated Mr. Boulay.

The rail line is out of service between Caplan and Gaspé because repairs are needed on the infrastructure, essentially the bridges. The owner of the Matapédia-Gaspé rail section, Transport Québec, hasn't invested in its refecton since its purchase, in the spring of 2015. That ministry did not invest in 2014 either, when the line



The plant manager, Alexandre Boulay, gave a tour of the plant to Ministers Dominique Anglade, Pierre Arcand and Sébastien Proulx.

was still owned by its current operator, the Gaspésie Railway Society.

Hundreds of resumes

LM Wind Power has received hundreds of resumes since mid-December, the beginning of its national recruitment campaign, supported by publicity broadcasted all over Québec. LM's message saying "We're hiring" was even seen during the very popular television show Bye Bye 2016, which arguably receives the biggest audience of the year on Radio-Canada, the French version of CBC.

Last fall Martin Laflamme had already responded to the first wave of recruiting. He

has been working at the blade plant since October 24. Mr. Laflamme who comes from Pointe-Jaune, near Rivière-au-Renard, left his job as a cabinetmaker to move back to the Gaspé. Without the job at LM, "I would still be in Quebec City," he says.

LM is mainly looking for production workers. Currently, 80% of LM employees come from the Grande-Vallée to Chandler stretch, a 100 kilometer radius of Gaspé.

"We're looking for people who want to move to our region, but we think that there are still people to recruit in our local basin," states Alexandre Boulay. The unemployment rate on the Gaspé Coast during the three last months of 2016 was 13.7 %.