

Atlas on the map

Loan will allow activated carbon company to expand production

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Jim Ford, vice president and chief operating officer at Atlas Carbon, talks about the Atlas Carbon facility to Lisa Spillman, from left, Mark Gordon and Campbell County Commissioner Micky Shober during a tour Wednesday evening. News Record Photo/Kelly Wenzel



Michael Jones, the co-founder and chief technology officer at Atlas Carbon, talks about the plant operations during a tour of the facility Wednesday evening. News Record Photo/Kelly Wenzel

Good things come to those who wait, and Atlas Carbon knows a thing or two about waiting.

On Wednesday afternoon, more than 18 months of waiting came to an end for the activated carbon company when a \$15 million loan from the Wyoming Economic Development Large Project program officially closed.

In October 2016, the State Loan and Investment Board agreed to award the \$15 million loan to Atlas, but it wasn't until last week that everything was finalized.

"It's great to get it across the finish line," said Jim Ford, Atlas Carbon's vice president and chief operating officer. "It feels like the door's opened in front of us."

The company didn't sit around for a year and a half waiting for the loan to be finalized, Ford said. Instead, it continued to invest and improve.

State Treasurer Mark Gordon was in Gillette on Wednesday for a tour of the facility, along with local elected officials, and he commended Atlas for its patience. The reason the process took so long, he said, was because “we had to do a lot of things the state’s never done before” when creating the Economic Development Large Project Program.

“A lot of this was brand new stuff for us,” Gordon said. “We wanted to make sure this was a success because this is exactly what we need to do to diversify our economy.”

“Just because money’s available doesn’t mean we’re going to be taking it (all) out of the bank (right away),” Ford said. “We’ve got to be sound in the way we spend it.”

Starting out, Atlas will use small amounts of money to enhance its operations, but even then it will be able to produce more than what its sales contracts are, Ford said.

“This is just going to be something that allows us to get a good running start on the next phase of expansion,” he said.

Atlas Carbon has 13 employees in Gillette, but Ford hopes eventually to bring that up to 22. The company also plans to double its production, from 16 million pounds of activated carbon a year to 32 million.

“We’re no Peabody (Energy Corp.), but we’re chipping away at it,” he said, adding that although Atlas won’t have hundreds of employees, it’s taking coal that would have been sold for \$12 a ton to a power plant “and amplifying that value, 50- to 80-fold.”

Atlas is the first recipient of a loan from the Economic Development Large Project Program, which was started in 2014. Gordon called it “a really good program for the future” because it allows the state to help Wyoming businesses that already have taken that first big risk and push them to the next level.

The program “allowed us to take a lucrative risk, and extend it to the sector that most benefits Campbell County,” he added.

Ford said “it would not have been right for the state to be in a project like this at its onset,” when it was just an idea.

“But to help bolster ideas that have proven to be valid, to help support companies that have already stepped out and taken that first risk, those things make sense (for the state),” he added.

Gordon last visited Atlas Carbon about three years ago, and he was impressed Wednesday by how far it’s come.

“You see people that are looking at a project, learning something, making it happen and figuring out how to make it better. I just think that’s amazing,” he said.

Four and a half years ago, “we thought we were going to build one flavor of carbon everybody will love,” Ford said, but he learned that “not everyone likes the same flavor.”

Activated carbon can be used for everything from wastewater treatment to food preparation, so “we’ve got the ability to be somewhat ambidextrous in the products we produce,” he said.

Gordon said states that are strongly opposed to burning coal might be more open to activated carbon, which could lead to future partnerships between Wyoming and those states.

“Instead of being about limitation, we can be about innovation and opportunity,” he said.

The future

Campbell County Commissioner Micky Shober said he’s excited for the future of Atlas Carbon, and he praised the company’s willingness to take a risk.

“If you only allow and support what is absolute and bulletproof to reduce risk of failure, you will lose a lot of opportunities,” he said.

Ford said he's excited for the development in the area around Atlas Carbon, known as Fort Union Industrial Park. Clean Coal Technologies Inc. will be moving its test plant there, and Ford said Atlas will be working closely with it, with the hopes that the company will eventually build a commercial plant in Campbell County.

And Energy Capital Economic Development's Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center, which is set to move into the area in the future, will develop a "pipeline of technology," he said.

"That's really going to spruce up the neighborhood," Ford said. "There's going to be a lot of smart people with good ideas, energy, hope and expectations."

There could be 10 tenants, all of which might work from a technology standpoint, three or four might be valid on a commercial scale and only one might be financially viable, he said.

But the possibility that one technology could make it big is "enough reason to do that, and there's no idea that should be turned away," Ford said.

"Some of these projects are going to work," Shober said. "Atlas Carbon's working, and it was a dream at one time of somebody's. Most of these projects, they start with an idea somewhere."