
Aventine Renewable Energy's new ethanol plant

by Kurt Johnson

Nearly three years after the first shovel of dirt was turned at Aurora West, Aventine Renewable Energy's new ethanol plant is nearing the end of construction.

It's been a long haul, delayed by a 16-month interruption when Aventine declared bankruptcy and Kiewit Energy crews left the scene, but the end product is now nearly ready to go.

"I want to give a big thank you to the entire town and all the people who helped us get to where we are," said Glenn See, co-owner of project manager JGSEE Management. "We had perfect weather with no rain and mild temperatures this fall and we couldn't have asked for a better finish to the project."

Most of the 300-plus Fagen, Inc. construction workers are gone now, though a core group of 50 to 75 will return Dec. 6 to take care of some final details. Aventine announced in October that the 113-million gallon plant will not start up until spring. The plant is actually designed to double in capacity with a phase two upgrade, though there are no immediate plans to consider that option.

"We'll have some process changes that we want to make to enhance the current system which we have discovered over the last couple of months," See explained.

One other pending detail involves approval from the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality for a water discharge permit. See said he anticipates clearing that hurdle soon.

"It's just a matter of options," he said. "We have three options of where we want to take our discharge and right now we're trying to figure out which option makes the most economical sense and what's best for the project."

Pasbrig to oversee both plants

With construction work now all but complete, the focus will shift toward start-up preparations. Aventine has tabbed Brian Pasbrig as the man to oversee operations going forward.

"We have a crew coming back along with Glenn on Dec. 6 to start the finish work and tie up loose ends, but mechanically we're ready to go," Pasbrig said Thursday.

Pasbrig has 16 years of experience in the ethanol industry, including a stint with Abengoa BioEnergy in York and most recently with Pinal Energy in Arizona. He will now be in charge of the existing ethanol plant, Nebraska Energy LLC, as well as the newly-constructed plant. Pasbrig said the unique features at Aurora West are what attracted him to the job.

"This has the potential to be a really exciting site in the ethanol industry with the megaplex design," he noted. "Having the ability to produce 160 million gallons in one location with a loop track unit train puts us in a competitive advantage position compared to other plants in the country."

While noting that ethanol, and the broader energy industry as a whole, can be volatile, Pasbrig said Aventine remains cautiously optimistic about the future.

"With the economy the way it is I don't think anybody is comfortable predicting much of anything, so we certainly recognize that it is volatile," he said. "But, the economy of scale we have here puts us in a pretty good position."

Pasbrig said he is particularly impressed with the loop rail system, part of which was a late addition in the construction process. The initial Aurora West design included two loop rails surrounding the entire site, which will be used jointly by Aventine and the Aurora Cooperative. Aventine also built in 8,000 feet of rail line near the end of the construction process to enhance its rail capacity.

"What we have now is the ability to have a full unit train (110 cars) and break up five ladder tracks inside of the spur," he explained. "We can have a unit train of ethanol and still have quite a few distiller's grain cars on site so that we can move the volume of distiller's grain we're going to produce. The idea is we have plenty of track to do what we need to do to move the volume we're going to create at this facility."

The hiring process for the new facility has already begun with recruitment advertising. Pasbrig said he projects that the two sites combined will need about 70 employees.

The initial interview process is expected to begin in December and January, with training to start soon after in preparation for a spring start-up.

“Part of the spring rationale is that we are starting up the Indiana site now, which is a sister site and a mirror image of this site,” Pasbrig said. “We’ll take lessons learned there and apply them as we get started here. Our plan is to start up in the spring and accelerate to 100 percent as fast as we can.”

In the meantime, Pasbrig said the Nebraska Energy plant is operating at full capacity, on pace to produce approximately 50 million gallons per year.

“We went through six weeks of downtime this summer,” Pasbrig said. “We did some work that had to be done to make utility tie-ins for Aurora West, as well as some maintenance work, but we’re running at 100 percent now. We’re fully staffed and really have no plans or thoughts for interruption.”