



Alabama auto industry: Colbert County plant to make LoadStar work truck

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By



LoadStar is a new work vehicle built in Colbert County.

Navistar International Corp. says its massive Colbert County plant will begin producing an all-new work truck -- the International LoadStar -- for U.S. and Canada customers in early 2013.

It's the first time the Lisle, Ill.-based company has said what it will do at the former National Alabama rail car plant, which it is leasing from the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the state pension plan that had bankrolled the rail plant project.

Navistar unveiled the new truck at the Mid-America Trucking Show in Louisville, Ky., last week. Navistar designed the truck from scratch after seeking input from drivers and fleet managers.

Its primary customer will be the waste industry, as a garbage truck, but Navistar believes the design is flexible enough to reach other sectors such as the concrete pumping and airplane refueling markets.

"It's primarily for the waste and refuse industry, but it's a work truck, so depending on what kind of body you want to put on the back of it makes other applications possible," Steve Schrier, spokesman for Navistar, said Monday.

Schrier said the total market for similar trucks in the U.S. and Canada is around 5,000 to 8,000 vehicles per year.

"Depending on what kind of market share we get, it will impact our production levels," he said. "We will be taking orders in the second half of 2012 with production beginning in early 2013."

That leaves a great deal of capacity at the former National Alabama rail car plant, which has more than 2 million square feet and stretches for a mile in the Barton Riverfront Industrial Park.

When Gov. Robert Bentley announced Navistar was leasing the plant in September, he said the move could eventually lead to 2,200 jobs in northwest Alabama over the next four years. The 185 workers Navistar has there now is a far cry from that figure, fueling speculation as to what may be next.

RSA owns the plant and signed Navistar to a 10-year lease after the state put together a new incentives package for the truck company.

That came after incentives, including a \$625 million RSA loan, failed to produce the 1,800 jobs promised when Canada-based National Steel Car announced plans to build railroad freight cars there in 2007.

Tate Godfrey, president of the North Alabama Industrial Development Association, said Monday there is renewed optimism that Navistar can help fulfill what was promised by National Alabama.

"It was built for the rail company and it was unfortunate that that didn't work out," Godfrey said. "But to have another company with the reputation and name of Navistar come in is just fantastic. This is building on what Alabama has been able to do in the automotive industry and it's great for that part of the state to be part of it."

Bill Taylor, chief executive of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, said Monday that Navistar has the clout to accomplish great things with the facility and an Alabama work force.

"It's a clear indication that Navistar is going to be doing more in the state," he said. "It builds on our automotive sector and reaches another corner of our state, so that's really, really good news. We're looking forward to more of that."

Taylor declined to speculate what Navistar will do with the rest of the space, but hinted there will be more good news to come.

"It's a big plant and there is lots of potential for what Navistar could do there," he said. "I think ramping up like they're doing is a good thing as the economy picks up. This is fabulous to see Navistar have a stronger presence in the state. They're a great company and they will be broadening the automotive sector in the state."

An immediate beneficiary will be the two Navistar plants at Jetplex Industrial Park next to Huntsville International Airport and the 800 employees who work there.

"The engines will come from our plant in Huntsville and full assembly of the trucks will be done in the Barton plant," Schrier said.

Godfrey called that "security" for the Navistar engine plants. "If some other suppliers come in," he said, "that would be even better."

Schrier said more news is likely coming.

"Stay tuned," he said. "As we solidify plans, we will be making other announcements in the future."

DETAILS

Navistar's Alabama-built LoadStar will feature:

Stainless steel cab-over design is corrosion-resistant and more durable

Variable depth frame rails are designed to be more durable

Cab interior is ergonomically designed with placement of controls

Navistar's Diamond Logic electrical system makes it easy to operate by enabling control of and communication between vehicle components and body equipment

Integrated powertrain with MaxxForce CleanBurn emissions technology (10-, 11- or 13-liter diesel engines) or a compressed natural gas engine (Cummins Westport ISL-G engine) available in spring 2013

90-degree door opening and 18-inch first step height

40-degree wheel cuts for maneuverability

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