

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

Strategies for Success / West Metal Works

## Local firm makes its mark with close-tolerance nuclear projects

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News Business Reporter  
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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News Executives at West Metal Works, from left, Chief Executive Officer Patricia Mertz, Vice President James Kelly and President Wayne Mertz check a wall module the firm is building to hold nuclear waste containers.

When the 22-foot-tall steel walls are finished, West Metal Works will load them on trucks, point them west on Interstate 90, and send them 2,000 miles to a rural corner of Washington state.

The Buffalo company is making critical parts for the \$6 billion cleanup of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, the U.S. government's Cold War-era plutonium manufacturing site.

The steel walls, interlaced with pipes and supported by a metal skeleton, will form the interior of two "melters" at Hanford. The specialized furnaces, wrapped in two feet of concrete, will transform liquid nuclear waste into balls of radioactive glass.

It's an important job for the locally owned business - worth about \$5 million in sales - and a demanding one.

"If there's a crack in a weld, there's no way to go inside and fix it," said James M. Kelly, vice president and general manager. The inside of the melters will be "hot" with radioactivity. The attention to quality is such that general contractor Bechtel has an inspector stationed at West Metal's plant in Depew.

The nuclear project exemplifies the sort of high-skill jobs that have engineered a turnaround for the Buffalo area manufacturer.

The contract, being performed in a temporary, leased plant, will create 35 new jobs, about doubling West Metal's employment. The task will end with the final delivery scheduled in September, but the company expects that 18 to 22 of the new jobs will continue as a result of other work for Bechtel.

When Patricia and Wayne M. Mertz bought it in 1995, West Metal was down to two workers. "It was really at the end of its rope," President Wayne Mertz said.

But it also had a track record of providing leak-proof tanks, like those for oxygen you see standing behind hospitals. And it had experience supplying the military, with components on the U.S. Navy's nuclear submarines.

Wayne and Patricia Mertz already owned sheet-metal fabricator Goergen-Mackwirth in Buffalo, a specialist in ventilation ductwork they acquired in 1986. When West Metal came on the market in 1995, as owner Nelson A. Pauly sought to retire, Wayne Mertz saw opportunity in the 50-year-old company. He envisioned cross-marketing products with his sheet-metal company while bidding for more close-tolerance work.

"It was a company doing the type of thing we were doing," he said. When he was a banker at M&T, before

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becoming an entrepreneur, Mertz remembers getting advice from NOCO Energy's Reginald Newman. "He said 'stick to what you know.' "

West Metal stuck to its steel fabrication expertise, but graduated to more complex, highly engineered projects. The company's "NQA-1" nuclear quality certification, a standard set by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, opens doors to the rarified business of nuclear projects. Auditors regularly examine the company's records and its quality checks to maintain the certification.

With its nuclear credentials, West Metal supplied components for the West Valley Demonstration Project, the federal cleanup near Springville in Cattaraugus County. It has also performed steel fabrication work for the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Los Alamos National Laboratory nuclear sites.

Being named "Outstanding Supplier" for the West Valley waste-to-glass project for six years running, from 1996 through 2001, probably helped win the much larger contract with Bechtel, Mertz said. The Hanford work will boost West Metal's revenues to \$6 million this year, from \$2 million in 2004. In all, it will supply 18 L-shaped wall modules, each weighing 16,000 pounds, that make up the walls of Hanford's two waste-melting units.

The company's union relationship helped it win the work, by providing welders certified for the close-tolerance project, Mertz said. The Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 22 provides highly trained welders with experience on nuclear projects.

"The relationship with the union's very strong - we couldn't do this without them," he said.

Local 22 has a five-year apprenticeship program, followed by journeyman-level training taught by advanced welders, business agent Michael W. McNally said. Work at West Valley has given the union a group of workers who are in demand at nuclear projects around the country, he said. In addition to the training levels and certifications needed for nuclear work, the workers have

also cleared the tests and background checks required on high-security projects.

"Once you're in the nuclear system . . . it gets easier," he said.

West Metal has also received an edge from government programs for small businesses. Based in Buffalo and majority owned by Patricia Mertz, it qualifies as a small, woman-owned business.

"All those little things helped package it for us," chief executive Patricia Mertz said.

Bechtel began work on the Hanford cleanup in 2001, 12 years after plutonium manufacturing ended in 1989. Covering 65 acres, the remediation plant for waste "vitrification," or encapsulating waste within glass, is to be running in 2011, the company says. Vitrified waste will be stored at Hanford temporarily, then moved to the underground federal repository at Yucca Mountain, Nev.

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