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Shale drillers anticipate creating more jobs

Thursday, December 16, 2010
By Candy Woodall

Doubling its workforce and the amount of natural gas produced, Range Resources Corp.'s Marcellus Shale Division has had a good year.

"It has exceeded expectations," said Matt Pitzarella, spokesman for the Texas-based energy company that operates its regional headquarters in Canonsburg.

The company, which now has 300 employees, continues to hire as it prepares to move late next year into new local headquarters in Southpointe.

The first phase of the five-story green facility is expected to be finished in November when the company plans to move into a 180,000-square-foot facility, he said.

The second phase, which calls for a 100,000-square-foot building attached to the main facility, is expected to be finished in November 2012. It will be able to accommodate about 700 people, and the company expects to fill that space, he said.

The company anticipates doubling its workforce next year as well as the amount of natural gas produced by 200 wells in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Range Resources has produced a daily average of more than 200 million cubic feet of natural gas this year -- enough to fuel every home in the 10-county region each day -- and it expects to produce 400 million cubic feet per day in 2011.

The company is drilling into the Marcellus Shale across 600,000 acres in southwestern Pennsylvania and another 400,000 in Williamsport.

The Marcellus Shale is said to be the biggest natural gas field in the United States -- spanning nearly 61 million underground acres under Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and New York. Southwestern Pennsylvania is called the "fairway" of the shale by industry experts, and its economic impact reaches beyond the energy in demand.

Local politicians have described it as the region's gold rush and the second coming of the coal and steel industries.

Range has written \$1 billion worth of checks to businesses and land owners in Pennsylvania, with more than \$700 million of that being paid in Washington County, Mr. Pitzarella said.

Another \$100 million has been spent in Allegheny County, he said. That money is usually paid to environmental engineering firms and consultants, he said.

Additionally, Range has given more than \$1 million to local charities this year and \$3 million during the past 2 1/2 years, he said.

A Penn State economic impact study predicted the industry will be an \$8 billion boon to the state, with about half of that money generated in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The study, commissioned by the Marcellus Shale Coalition, also projected that 88,000 jobs would be created in Pennsylvania this year.

Those jobs are great opportunities for veterans, said Kathryn Klaber, executive director of the Marcellus Shale Coalition.

Range employs dozens of veterans, Mr. Pitzarella said.

"They're ideal candidates," he said. "They're hard workers, team-oriented, natural leaders and have no issues with long hours."

Many of them also have had experience with oil and oil-related equipment from serving in the Middle East, he said.

Sometimes they employ veterans in between tours of service.

When Carl Dokter served another tour of duty overseas, Range held his job for two years and hosted a welcoming ceremony for him when he returned, he said.

For its employment of veterans, the company for two consecutive years has been named a Patriotic Employer by the Department of Defense's National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

Chesapeake Energy Corp. is another driller that employs a large number of veterans and is expanding its local footprint.

The company employs about 150 military officers and servicemen, spokesman Rory Sweeney said.

Chesapeake, headquartered in Oklahoma City, employs about 500 people in Pennsylvania and expects that number to grow as the industry expands.

From jobs that require multiple doctorate degrees to those that require no degree at all, Range has built nearly all of its Canonsburg workforce locally, Mr. Pitzarella said.

"Only about a quarter of our local employees are from out of state, and those are usually the guys working on the wells because they have the most experience," he said.

The industry's growth in Pennsylvania also has made it possible to reverse the exodus of young people who get educated in the state and then leave to find work, he said.

For example, Matt Curry, who grew up in Lower Burrell and attended Penn State, left for Texas and worked on the Barnett shale.

As the local industry grew, he was attracted back to the region and now lives in Peters with his wife Heather and their family. He is in charge of Range's development team.

"[Mr. Curry] is in a group we call the 'gumbanders,'" Mr. Pitzarella said. "They're those who were educated here, left to work and came back."

Attracting workers back to Pennsylvania -- especially in the southwestern region -- expanding its local operations and doubling its gas production safely are among Range's priorities, he said.

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First published on December 16, 2010 at 5:51 am