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Tough ground

Toni Pirkle, The Jamestown Sun
Published Wednesday, December 12, 2007

The Jamestown Sun

SPRITWOOD, N.D. — Despite the cold weather, construction of Great River Energy's Spiritwood Station is moving right along.

Dennis

Pozarnsky, GRE's construction site manager, said work on the power plant began on the site a few weeks before the Nov. 6 groundbreaking. Crews put in 12-hour days until Thanksgiving, moving earth, backfilling and leveling the site as well as starting on footings. The idea was to get as much done as possible before the ground froze. That way, they could slow the schedule down a bit once the frigid weather arrived, Pozarnsky said.



John M. Steiner / The Sun Construction workers brave the elements Tuesday in Spiritwood as they work at putting in footings on the frozen site of the future Great River Energy power plant.

“Even though we had a late start, we had good weather until Thanksgiving,” he said. “So we gave ourselves some room in the schedule.”

Since then, the ground has frozen 3 feet down and dealing with dirt is more like breaking up and moving chunks of ice around. However, Wanzek Construction's 30-man crew continues to work on putting in the footings for the plant and whatever else can be done in the cold weather.

“The earthwork has come to a stop, but we were about 80 percent done there anyway,” Pozarnsky said. “We've had a good year.”



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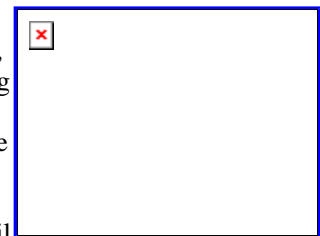


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Construction of the \$276 million plant is expected to be finished in 2010. Pozarnsky said that's a tight timetable for something as huge and complicated as a power plant.

"It's a two and a half year construction cycle — a really aggressive schedule," he said.

Although the ground has frozen, a pile driver continues to hammer pipes 200 feet down to drive in footings that will eventually support the massive structure of the building. After the pipes have been driven in far enough, they're filled with concrete. Then more concrete covers the footing at ground level topped by metal framing. Several of the footings were wrapped in blanket material Tuesday to keep the concrete warm while it cures.

"There will be 400 piles driven in, then the foundation goes on top," Pozarnsky said. "You need very sturdy footings for the (power plant) equipment. We'll keep pile driving for as long as we can through the winter."

Pozarnsky said they had already poured footings when it was 16 degrees below zero. And even though it takes more effort, it's still productive, as it keeps the project on schedule.

"We plan to have the auxiliary buildings, the footings and the anchor bolts all in by June," he said. "That's when the steel is coming."

The first footings to go in were for a multi-purpose building. Construction of the concrete facility will begin in January. It will house areas for the crew to eat, warm up, clean up and take breaks. It will also be the site of offices. The crew and staff are using mobile home-type units that are run on generators. Otter Tail Power Co. will soon hook up electricity from its nearby substation.

With nothing enclosed yet and cold weather to operate in, Pozarnsky said the job could become more dangerous for the crew. And it's the crew's safety that is the first concern, he said. So far there have been no injuries and Pozarnsky said they plan to keep it that way. Crew members are bundled up in layers of clothing and face masks. Plus, they are encouraged to take plenty of warm-up breaks to avoid frostbite.

"This will be one of our toughest winters because we're so exposed to the elements. We could only do this with a contractor who works in the northern tier," he said, referring to Wanzek Construction, which is based in Fargo. "And if the weather gets too brutal, we just won't work."

By this time next winter, Pozarnsky figures they'll be hitting peak employment at the site with about 400 workers. In part, the multi-purpose and auxiliary buildings are being constructed in anticipation of the future work force.

One area of the site has already been prepared for all the material delivered for construction. The materials in this staging area will be laid out in precise places, Pozarnsky said, so what's

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needed can be found easily even if it's buried under snow.

Once it's up and running, the coal-fired power plant will supply steam heat to Cargill Malt, which is northeast of the GRE site. The insulated steam pipes will be above ground. To the east is Spiritwood Station's wastewater pond and further east is Cargill's pond. The station will use Cargill's waste water to generate 62 megawatts of baseload electricity and 37 megawatts of peaking electricity. The excess steam used to make electricity will heat Cargill and the ethanol plant.

"It's a really interesting concept and a good idea," Pozarnsky said. "It's the first combined heat and power plant in North Dakota."

Spirit Ethanol has yet to break ground or begin construction. Both are expected in the spring. The ethanol plant will be located across the road and mostly west of the GRE power plant.

Pozarnsky said Cargill, Otter Tail and the community of Spiritwood have been helpful and hospitable.

"They all have been very gracious," he said.

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