

Wabi ships 50-tonne skips to Saskatchewan

■ A first for Canada

BY WALTER FRANCIZYK

A New Liskeard foundry that cut its metallurgical teeth in the fabled Cobalt silver camp is making history in the potash mines of Saskatchewan.

Wabi Iron and Steel Corp., a fixture in northeastern Ontario's mining industry for more than a century, recently manufactured and shipped Canada's largest skips to the Agrium Inc. potash mine in Vanscoy, Saskatchewan. The three skips - each capable of lifting 50 tonnes of potash - are part of a \$1.5-billion expansion of the Vanscoy Mine.

"It is Canada's first 50-tonne skip," said Wabi's director of sales Peter Tuomi. "It's a first for Canada." The Vanscoy Mine currently accounts for three per cent of the world's potash capacity and is the globe's 10th largest producer. Its expansion to more than 3 million tonnes a year will make it the world's eighth largest producer of the crop nutrient and fertilizer component.

"From a mine hoisting perspective, this is a huge step for the Canadian mining industry," said Stan Gorzalczyński, Wabi's vice-president of operations. "Agrium is essentially doubling their capacity and we are excited to be a part of it."

68 feet high

Made of welded steel, each 68-foot high skip is capable of hoisting potash at 4,000 feet-per-minute in the 3,600-foot Vanscoy shaft. "There are only two skips per shaft. The third is a spare," says Tuomi. The new equipment dwarfs the 12-16-tonne skips typically used in Ontario's gold and nickel mines.

Wabi has built skips and associated equipment for Saskatchewan potash mines for many years, but this was the first sale to Agrium.

Tuomi said Wabi is aware of the expansion

plans for all Saskatchewan potash mines. "Agrium was on our list for calling on a regular basis," he said. "When they finally made the decision that they were going to do this expansion, we were short-listed along with three other companies." Wabi's tender, including design, manufacturing timelines and price, won the competition.

The company was contracted to build three 30-tonne skips to be used temporarily at Vanscoy to give the mine added production capacity and to familiarize the operation with high-capacity hoisting. "They're only going to use them for

a short amount of time, until the big ones get there and get installed," Tuomi said.

Designing the 50-tonne skips began early last year. Wabi would make a design proposal and submit it to the engineering firm SNC Lavalin, hired by Agrium to manage the mine expansion. SNC would discuss Wabi's proposal with the client and come back with possible changes. "It went back and forth like that for eight or nine months," Tuomi recalled. Getting the design right and getting a sign-off from everyone involved was a challenge. "It took a lot

longer than the typical 15-16-tonne skip we would sell to someone in Sudbury."

Handling the large equipment within Wabi's manufacturing facility was also challenging. The skips were trucked in pieces to Saskatchewan for final assembly. The biggest skip Wabi had made prior to the sale to Agrium was a 35-tonne skip for a salt mine in southern Ontario. Tuomi expects this large project will raise the privately owned company's profile as it competes with large international conglomerates.

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