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Plum Creek Chooses Reliance Motors for State-of-the-Art MDF Plant

Located in the small town of Columbia Falls, Montana, not too far from Glacier National Park, you'll find the largest fiber board plant in North America—the third largest in the world. It's owned by Plum Creek Timber Company, Inc., the second largest private timberland owner in the United States. Plum Creek products include furniture-quality veneer logs, proprietary plywood, and specialty lumber.



For years, Plum Creek has held a leadership position in the medium dense fiber board, or MDF business. But back in 1999 they decided to expand their capabilities to produce an enhanced product line. In January of 2000 they broke ground and began constructing a new state-of-the-art facility to produce Super-Refined MDF-2[®], a proprietary engineered wood panel prized by woodworkers for its smooth unblemished surface.

Their \$69 million investment would represent a quantum leap in fiber refining technology, and they selected Reliance as their key motor supplier. Why? With a long history of using Reliance motors, Plum Creek engineers knew they could count on a product that would provide superior performance and reliability. But more importantly, they understood the company would continue to act as their trusted partner.

Choosing a Trusted Partner

Plum Creek project engineer, Jack Hinman faced a tremendous challenge when he was asked to head up a five person team to build the new plant and get it operational in less than a year. To accomplish the goal they looked for manufacturers that would act as their partner. "It was a very fast track and we had only a limited number of people to work on the project; that's why we turned to the product and the people we had experience with," stated Hinman. "We rely on the company for a lot of support. This Columbia Falls facility has used Reliance motors since 1974, we know the product well, we've had good luck with the motors, and that's why we specified them in the new line."

The team worked closely with their European OEM's to make sure they understood why Reliance motors needed to be included on the equipment that would be installed in Montana. "Our past successful experience using Reliance motors prompted us to specify Reliance as much as we could," stated Hinman. "We told our OEM's overseas that we wanted equipment we could replace here, and we wanted something that we had good experience with".

Reliance Provides Performance

The center piece of the facility is a continuous press designed to specifically produce panels almost paper thin, in a variety of widths and lengths. The process control and refining systems are modeled after technology used in the pulp and paper industry, an exacting manufacturing process that assures a fine fibered quality panel.

This is where you'll find Reliance 200 HP RPM™ AC Inverter Duty motors. The press has the capability of making boards from two and a half millimeters up to an inch and a half thick. But the range of speeds required from the motor to produce the different boards is dramatic. To produce the thin material you need to run 60 meters per minute, guaranteed throughout the process. The thicker material needs to be run at 10 to 20 meters per minute. The RPM AC Inverter Duty motor is ideal for this application because it can operate at over 1000:1 constant torque, with special base speeds, and at a wide constant HP range. In addition, multiples of these motors can be controlled to operate in a coordinated way. "It's critical that the motor provide constant torque at all of the speeds we need for the process," states Hinman. "The Reliance product is able to perfectly match the correct speed through the entire system, driven from the press as the master all the way to the end."

Reliability

This line runs 24 hours a day and produces on average 110 feet of board per minute. It's a highly profitable plant that produces \$40 million a year in revenues. Plum Creek sells everything they make and they don't keep inventory on the floor. That means if the line shuts down for any reason, they lose money at about a rate of \$2,000 per hour. In a competitive market with thin margins, a motor failure can cause disaster. According to John Conner, Plum Creek Electrician, that's another reason why they keep coming back to Reliance motors. "We track downtime with a very sophisticated automated system, so we are always identifying which components are giving us problems," stated Conner. "Reliability is very critical, we've always had a good track record with Reliance motors, and that's why we are sticking with them."

It All Comes Back to Partnership

Over his 29 years at the Plum Creek facility Conner told us that he can name only a few standout partners, and Reliance is one of them. "It seems like every big project we've done here, we have depended on your company to help us," he said. "We count on you as our go-to people."

In addition, Conner views Reliance as a long term player in the forest industry and a company that is committed to the isolated regions where Plum Creek locates. That's very important to Conner and other engineers at the plant. "Who can we call in the middle of the night or on a Sunday afternoon to come help us? There are some folks that will do that, and some folks who aren't set up to do that," he adds. "Yes, the products are proven, but it's the people that are really important. That's why we keep coming back to Reliance motors."

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