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Royal Canadian Mint builds major addition

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The mint's 70,000-square-foot expansion will allow it to increase production of multi-ply plated-steel blanks by 50 per cent.

One of the world's biggest coin-production plants -- the Royal Canadian Mint's facility in Winnipeg -- is about to get a whole lot bigger.

Work is underway on a \$68-million, 70,000- square-foot expansion of the 180,000-square-foot facility on Lagimodiere Boulevard.

The expansion, which is to be completed by June 2013, will boost the plant's annual capacity for producing multi-ply plated-steel blanks -- the mint's bread-and-butter product -- by 50 per cent, to three billion pieces from the current two billion.

"That's a pretty big expansion," Paul Lefebvre, executive director of the mint's Canadian circulation business line, said in an interview Monday.

Lefebvre said all the Canadian coins the mint strikes are now made from plated-steel cores, or blanks, including the new loonies and toonies. The same is true of the bulk of the blanks it produces for foreign countries.

"It's where we shine, so to speak."

The mint has about seven or eight per cent of the world market for plated-steel blanks, he said, and the goal is to double that to 15 per cent over the next eight years.

He said a growing number of countries is switching to plated-steel coins from the traditional alloy versions, which are made from nickel and copper and are less durable, less secure and more expensive to make.

The addition will help the mint achieve its goal by providing enough extra space to add two more plating lines to the two it already has -- one right away and the other when demand warrants.

"That could be anywhere from next year to never," he said, depending on how successful the mint proves in landing new orders. "But I'd like to believe it will be... within a couple of years."

Lefebvre said two of the world's biggest users of coins -- the United States and China -- are among a number of countries taking a long, hard look at the mint's plated-steel technology.

While there's no way of knowing if they will become mint customers, Lefebvre said landing them would enable the Crown corporation to reach its 15 per cent target almost overnight.

"It would be so big, we would have to get help from some of our partners (to produce the blanks). It would be massive."

Although the bulk of the new addition will be devoted to production, about 5,000 square feet of it will be set aside for a new R & D (research and development) Centre of Excellence.

Lefebvre said the mint is already one of the most innovative coin producers in the world. The new R & D Centre of Excellence, with dedicated equipment and staff, will enable it to build on that reputation.

The plant has two or three people working full-time on R & D projects, and a couple more will likely be added once the new centre is fully operational in July 2013, he said.

They will be among an estimated 30 to 40 additions to the plant's 300-member staff. The other additions will include equipment operators and warehouse, maintenance and security personnel.

The addition is the plant's first major expansion since 1999, when it added 60,000 so it could start producing plated-steel blanks and coins.

"So we're basically cloning what we did 12 years ago," Lefebvre said.

The federal government's decision to stop producing pennies -- the plant spewed out the last one on May 4 -- has also freed up space and equipment that can now be used to produce more steel-plated coins and blanks for the mint's foreign customers, Lefebvre said.

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City plant makes 750 coins a second

The Royal Canadian Mint has two production facilities, one in Winnipeg and the other in Ottawa, and employs about 1,000 people.

The Ottawa plant produces hand-crafted collector and commemorative coins, gold bullion coins, medals and medallions. The corporation's gold and silver refining and advanced engineering operations are also located there.

The Winnipeg manufacturing plant is the high-tech, high-volume facility where all of Canada's circulation coins are produced, as well as coins and blanks for other countries.

Over the past 25 years, the mint has produced coins for more than 60 countries, including about 30 that now use multi-ply, plated-steel coins instead of alloy coins.

With more than 40 coining presses, the Winnipeg plant has the capacity to produce as many as 20 million coins a day, or 750 a second.

Last year, the mint produced 2.7 billion plated-steel and alloy coins and blanks. That included 1.6 billion coins for the Canadian market and 1.1 billion coins and blanks for 13 foreign customers.

-- source: Royal Canadian Mint

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