

Locally Produced Generators Aid in Disasters such as Sept. 11

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Katolight employees are settling in to their new 80,000 square foot manufacturing plant that sits on the northeast edge of Mankato's Eastwood Industrial Centre. Inside, engines and electricity generators move along an assembly line as those employees do the work needed to turn those machines into one of Katolight's many generator set products.

Smaller generators are being tested in an enclosed part of the factory where hoses are set up to carry the fumes out of the building. Painters put the finishing touches on another generator in another large enclosed room in the facility. It's the flat yellow color that most Katolight generators are painted unless a customer orders a specific color to match a building or some other structure.

Thousands of miles away, one of those dull looking machines is chugging away. It's mounted on wheels and has been transported to a site where buildings have crumbled in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Towers in New York City. Another Katolight Generator set, mounted on a trailer is humming nearby. The machines are doing what they've been depended onto do many times over; bring electric power to places where it has been lost. It's often during a time of tragedy that the machines are needed most.

The two generators still being used at ground zero in New York City are powering a cellular telephone network, a network that played an important role in the rescue efforts that immediately followed the tragedy. That communication network is still needed as clean up continues. Mike Molway is president of FM Generator, the company that is providing the generators for the cellular network. He's hoping employees at the Katolight plant realize the role they are playing in the tragedy.

"They build a generator, they paint it, they load it on a truck and that's the last they ever see of it." Molway said. "The people who build these generators, they do a nice job and its something that's keeping a major operation going." "People's lives are depending on this equipment. If the generators fail, the lines go dead and they won't have any telephone communications."

Employees at Katolight's plants do realize how important their work is, said Lyle Jacobson, president and chief executive officer. The generators were used recently to bring electricity to houses and businesses in Oklahoma during ice storms that cut power for two weeks. There are custom built Katolight Generators in the hangar that houses Air Force one, the State Department and one of the homes owned by Microsoft owner Bill Gates.

"But it's the hundreds of less noticeable places that use Katolight Generators where the company has built its name during nearly a half century of business," Jacobson said. The generators are commonly used in hospitals, providing the backup power for trauma centers and other areas with life-saving medical equipment. They backup the power at water treatment plants and other public utilities. In agriculture, Katolight products have been used for years to provide backup power on the farm. As the use of confinement barns grows,

more generators will be needed to provide backup to ventilation systems. Whole herds of cattle or hogs could be lost within a couple of hours if power for three systems is lost and ventilation is cut.

"Every one of the confinement facilities you see being built needs an emergency generator." Jacobson said. With the new facility and its older Katolight plant on Third Avenue, Katolight is producing about 2,000 generators per year. They range in size from 15 kilowatts to 2,000 kilowatts. The company is still small compared to its competitors, such as Caterpillar. Most of our competitors are much larger than us," he said. "But we're a smaller company that's growing fast and sneaking up on them." Jacobson said there is enough room in the two facilities to triple production which means the family-owned company shouldn't have to move or expand for many years. If an expansion is needed in the future there is room at the new Eastwood Centre site. The company's 150 employees will celebrate 30 years of business in May. Katolight was spun off of Kate Engineering in 1952. Both businesses were owned by Jacobson's in-laws until 1978, when Kate Engineering was sold.

Jacobson started working for Katolight in 1979. He took over as president in 1986. Although he estimates he gets between two and three offers a month from businesses that want to buy the company, he wants to keep it in the family for now. He does not have any children who are interested in taking over the business so he said there will have to be some change of ownership within the next 10 years because he is planning to retire within a decade. "I have a very strong management team that hopefully can keep the company going and growing if I want to ease into retirement," he said.