



PurePower Technologies is introducing a new turbocharger for light-duty trucks. Turbocharged might be an apt description for the Midlands company's recent performance.

Always a solid performer as part of multi-billion-dollar global companies, the truck parts manufacturer has flourished in the year since it was spun off. It's now a \$120 million company by itself, according to Gerald Sweetland, president and chief executive.

"I think we've built a really solid foundation for growth," he says. "It's a new chapter for PurePower and we expect it to end positively."

In February 2016, a deal was announced in which Navistar Inc. would sell PurePower Technologies to a pair of private equity firms. PPT, operating independently, would then take on Navistar as one of its primary customers.

Four months later, PPT announced a \$15 million, 79-job expansion at its manufacturing facility in Blythewood and research offices in Columbia. Sweetland says the company is already blowing through those figures, on the way to 100 jobs and up to \$20 million by the end of next year. It even moved its headquarters out of the Blythewood facility and into the Columbia R&D center to create more space for production.

Starting from scratch

Sweetland can remember when the company headcount was considerably less than its current 338.

"I was the sixth employee hired," says Sweetland, an engineer who moved from his native Michigan to join the startup that would become PurePower Technologies. "There were no desks. There were two phone lines and a fax machine."

The operation was born in 1999 as a joint venture between Navistar and Siemens to make diesel fuel injectors. Launched from a suburban Columbia business park, it completed a Blythewood manufacturing facility in 2000. From there, it found itself under changing corporate umbrellas, from Siemens to Continental AG and back to Navistar.

Navistar named the operation PurePower Technologies in 2010, but by 2014, it was looking to sell.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Out on its own, PurePower Technologies thrives

By Richard Breen
Photography Provided By PurePower Technologies

"There has been a tremendous amount of government programs created recently. We're starting to see the benefits of that."

"They went from a truck and engine company to concentrating more on trucks," Sweetland says. "We became a non-core entity."

Non-core, but also low-maintenance.

"We were always very profitable," Sweetland says. "Our customer ratings were always very high and our safety was world class."

In came Kensington Capital Partners LLC and Smithfield Group LLP to purchase PPT and make it an independent company. The corporate umbrellas were now gone, but so was protection from economic storms.

"The three previous owners have all been multi-billion-dollar global companies. You can call it protection, which is a benefit," Sweetland says. "As an independent company, that's removed, but the positive thing is your decision process becomes significantly faster."

As an example, he gives the turbocharger project.

"We developed the business plan last year in about four months," Sweetland says. "We presented it to the board of directors, asking for \$3.5 million. That investment was approved within a month and we went out and spent the necessary capital, built up the business case, and we're launching our first turbocharger in under a year."

"If we had been under a larger company, it probably would have taken close to a year and a half just to get the approval."

Expanding the triangle

Jeff Ruble, economic development director for Richland County, says he's known Sweetland, and PPT, for as long as they've been in South Carolina.

"They're definitely more entrepreneurial now than they've ever been," Ruble says.

The automotive manufacturing boom in the South has been concentrated in a triangle. Ruble places its corners at Chattanooga, Tenn.; Tuscaloosa, Ala.; and Greer, which is home to a BMW plant. The Midlands currently sits outside those business boundaries.

"Hopefully with Volvo (building a 100,000-vehicle-per-year plant in Berkeley County) and Daimler (building a \$500 million assembly plant at its Charleston facility), that triangle is going to be pulled a little farther to the south and east," Ruble says.

It could boost automotive manufacturing in the Midlands, although Sweetland says he's already found it easy to do business here.

"You have the state chamber, the Columbia chamber, the Blythewood chamber, all willing to support the business community any way they can," he says. "The Commerce Department has been very active. Even up to the governor's office."

"We have a significant amount of employees that contribute to our economy. I think all these local businesses and government agencies recognize that."

And finding additional employees hasn't been a hurdle to growth.

"There has been a tremendous amount of government programs created recently. We're starting to see the benefits of that," Sweetland says. "The talent's here and I think it's been very positive."

It's also been positive personally for employee No. 6, who's worked his way up to the corner office.

"I feel I'm pretty fortunate. With the mix of opportunities I was given and being recognized and getting continual promotions, you just put yourself in a position to be successful," Sweetland says. "I'm very familiar with all our employees. I was part of the hiring process. I know their family and their spouse and their kids. This is something that's personal to me."



PurePower Technologies Fuel Injectors



PurePower Technologies Turbo