Knight Hawk Opens Prairie Eagle, Plans for Underground Mine

BY LEE BUCHSBAUM

Steve Carter, Knight Hawk's founder, has steadily grown Illinois Basin operations.

The Knight Hawk family of mines keeps growing. In March, the company's new Prairie Eagle mine, located in Perry County, Ill., began operating. It's expected to produce between 950,000 and 1.2 million tons of Herrin No. 6 coal annually with a workforce of 50. A new 500-tph, heavy-media prep plant, designed by Sedgman, is under construction and Knight Hawk expects to have the plant operational by July. The company will employ an additional 30 truckers to move the coal from the Prairie Eagle prep plant to its Mississippi River transload facility or the former Captain Mine West Transload facility, which the company uses on a limited basis. With 15 to 20 million tons of reserves, the new mine has an expected life of more than a decade.

According to Knight Hawk Vice President, Josh Carter, the new mine will likely produce about 50,000 a month for the first few months using a pair of Caterpillar D11 dozers to move the overburden and a Komatsu 1250 excavator equipped with an 8 cubic yard backhoe to harvest the coal. Prairie Eagle will also employ a pair of Komatsu 100-ton trucks and a Komatsu 475 dozer as well. Several of these machines are coming from Knight Hawk's Creek Paum headquarters operation.

The initial pit will be approximately 180- to 200-ft wide, 70-ft deep, and 1/2-mile long. As they "jump around a lot," according to Josh Carter, "the pits will vary in length and size with some being as small as a quarter mile long and others over a mile." Although the overburden is fairly consistent, they anticipate the first strip cut will have an overburden of 70 ft. The Herrin No. 6 seams vary in width from 6- to 9- ft. There is the potential to mine the Harrisburg No. 5 seam, but those deposits are not expected to be significant.

Also by mid-summer, Knight Hawk plans to begin highwall mining using a Superior Highwall machine. Prairie Eagle will be one of the first mines in southern Illinois to use this technology. "This is one of the developments we are most excited about," said Josh Carter. "This allows us to mine areas that are really too deep to strip, but too shallow to underground mine. It gives us the opportunity to economically go after coal in the 100-ft depth range."

Not only will the Prairie Eagle mine be one of the most high tech, state of the art surface mines in the region, since it is located adjacent to several pre-law stripping operations, the mine will also reclaim those sites as well. "We're on ground next to where Arch and some other mines once worked," said Josh Carter. "We're really excited to be able to clean up those old spoils and reclaim that area."

Presently, Knight Hawk has four operating mines and two carbon recovery operations, one at the former Fidelity No. 11 mine near DuQuoin and a new $2 million facility at the former Old Ben No. 21 mine near Sesser. They ship between 10,000 and 11,000 tons a day all by truck.

"We move about 400 to 440 loads per day," said Steve Carter, founder and owner of Knight Hawk, and Josh's father. "With this new mine we'll be rising up to between 600 and 700 a day." Most of that coal goes to Knight Hawk's docks on the Mississippi River in Chester.

The company supplies 25 to 30 customers, but "no one customer buys more than 12% of our yearly shipments," said Steve Carter. "We need that flexibility." From their Chester dock, much of their coal goes upstream to Minnesota, but more and more is going south to Nashville and Louisiana. Some is even exported to European destinations.

"In today's market, things have changed," said Steve Carter. "Appalachian coal is just getting more scarce."

Knight Hawk will complete a 500 tph prep plant this summer.
Since its inception, the company strives to do the work that the bigger companies could not do or would not attempt. "We have been able to adapt our technology to the 'scraps' they have left behind," said Steve Carter. "Using mobile equipment, D11 dozers, we can work in these situations. We've had lots of people puzzle over how we're going to do this without draglines. But we've found ways."

Currently, Knight Hawk has approximately 150 employees with an additional 50 contractors on site. In addition, they employ another 110 to 120 truckers to move their coal from their scattered operations to their two loading facilities. Including those workers, the entire force nears 300. "With the new mine, we've brought on some new people, and we'll be adding another 35 employees this year, maybe another 10-15 contractors and more truckers," said Steve Carter.

In the coming months, Knight Hawk plans to continue their expansion and they have begun to take steps to open an underground mine in the Royalton area. "We are hoping to have that permit filed later this year," said Steve Carter. "There is about 30 million tons between Elkville and Royalton beneath about 300 feet of overburden. It will be our first true underground mine, and we're excited about that."

When that happens, Steve Carter envisions hiring another 100 or more. "By 2007 we're likely to have over 500 employees total," said Steve Carter. "It's still a drop in the bucket compared to what used to be here. At one time, Arch Coal had more than 1,000, and across the road at CONSOL Energy, they had the same. Freeman and Old Ben—where we're pulling gob now—they had much more than this. Given the training of the workforce in the area, we've had no problem finding good employees."

When Knight Hawk began operations in the late 1990s, it was intended to be a small operation. "We were only shipping 40,000 tons a month when we started this company six years ago," laughed Steve Carter. "We really didn't have any desire to be one of the bigger outfits. Now we mine more than 200,000 a month, soon to be 300,000. And, maybe much more than that in the near future. Times have changed, and now we are one of the big guys out here."

Author information
Buchsbaum is a Denver-based freelance writer and photographer specializing in industrial subjects. He can be reached through his web site at www.lmbphotography.com or by phone at 303-746 8172.