

AgustaWestland: More growth coming to Philadelphia

By Henry J. Holcomb

Inquirer Staff Writer

AgustaWestland, the global helicopter-maker, celebrated the opening of its new assembly line in Philadelphia yesterday with talk that its 20-year-old plant will keep expanding.

> Meanwhile, business and political leaders hailed the opening and the region's rapidly growing helicopter industry as a major boost to Philadelphia's global image.

> U.S. Sen. Bob Casey (D., Pa.), Mayor Nutter and Reps. Allyson Y. Schwartz, Patrick Murphy and Joe Sestak, all area Democrats, spoke at the ceremony in a hangar where new helicopters will undergo preflight testing.

> The new assembly line at Agusta's 40-acre Northeast Philadelphia Airport complex, which will employ 500 by year's end, is already assembling the twin-engine AW139.

> This is a modern counterpart of the renowned Vietnam-era Huey and can be configured for VIP transport, rescue, support for offshore oil rigs, law enforcement, homeland security, and military tasks.

> Continued expansion is likely, Stephen C. Moss, chief executive officer of AgustaWestland North America Inc. said in an interview. "Our challenge is to keep up with demand," said Moss, a Cape May native who earned degrees from Eastern University and Villanova University.

> Rapid economic growth in places such as India and China adds to the demand. Also, Moss said, helicopters offer increased safety and reduced operating costs. Each hour of flight once required 15 man-hours of maintenance, but that ratio is down to one-to-one, Moss said.

> The Philadelphia complex is scheduled to turn out about 60 helicopters a year. About half will be the single-engine AW119 Koala it began assembling in 2004 and half the larger AW139.

> The addition was designed to handle larger helicopters in the future, possibly the US101, which Agusta builds jointly with Lockheed Martin Corp. and Textron Inc.'s Bell Helicopter unit.

> This big three-engine helicopter is being purchased to become the next "Marine One" presidential helicopter.

> There is little chance the presidential fleet will be built here. But other models built by Agusta and Lockheed, without Bell, could be assembled here, Moss said. These include search-and-rescue and 22-passenger commercial transport models.

> The search-and-rescue version is in a contest with Boeing Co.'s Philadelphia-built Chinook and Sikorsky Aircraft Corp.'s H-92 Superhawk for a 145-helicopter Air Force contract worth an estimated \$10 billion.

> Agusta's Philadelphia-built model "was designed," Moss added, "to replace the Huey. It lands in the same footprint but has 50 [percent] to 60 percent greater usable carrying volume."

> Philadelphia's helicopter industry is booming. Three industry leaders - Boeing, Agusta and Sikorsky - now build a total of five helicopter models here and do modification work on many more.

> This is giving the region's image a needed boost, said Thomas G. Morr, chief executive of Select Greater Philadelphia, the business-backed job-creation initiative. "If you look at how Philadelphia is perceived around the world, its image is out-of-date" and linked to old industry, Morr said in an interview at the event. "But this is a perfect example of high-tech, precision

manufacturing. It makes the point we now have a knowledge-driven economy."

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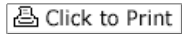
> Tour the AgustaWestland plant and hear CEO Giuseppe Orsi talk about the expansion plan via video at <http://go.philly.com/agusta>

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