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Local company attracts accolades for very cool product

Stirling Ultracold is adding more workers at facility

By Fred Kight



Photo Credits: Fred Kight for The Athens NEWS

Photo Caption: Neill Lane, CEO of Stirling Ultracold, stands next to one of the ultra-low freezers his company is manufacturing.

"Our objective is to be the number one ultra-low freezer manufacturer in the world." – There's good reason to think this may be more than wishful thinking by Neill Lane, CEO of Stirling Ultracold.

The company recently won an Outstanding New Product of the Year Award for an ultra-low temperature freezer that is made at its plant in the Bill Theisen Industrial Park near The Plains.

"I think it validates the reason we went into this business, which is we believe we could make a freezer that beats the competition," said Lane.

Stirling Ultracold – a division of Global Cooling, Inc. – has grown to have 33 employees, and Lane said the company expects to hire 10 more by the end of the year. Most of the new hires will be on the production line.

The award "is definitely accelerating the adoption of our units," said Lane.

"Our strategy is to sell to institutions" like large biotech companies, government laboratories, and universities, which may each have "two or three thousand freezers" for use in life science research.

Previously located on Columbus Road in Athens, Stirling is now in the Theisen building that was vacated by Specialty Books.

Lane said the plant is more than three times larger than the old one and is better suited for production. "We will be able to make between 5,000 and 8,000 units a year."

Lane said they've invested \$3.5 million to expand into the 50,000-square-foot facility. That makes for a total of \$7 million spent on the operation since Stirling got started in 2009.

In developing the freezer, Global Cooling has received assistance from TechGROWTH Ohio, as well as from Ohio University through the Voinovich School, the College of Business, the Innovation Center and the Office of Research and Creative Activity.

"We are very committed to staying here," said Lane, who also cited help from the Athens County Port Authority, which owns Stirling Ultracold's building. The company relocated to the building in April 2011.

"When the company was ready to expand into a larger facility, the Port Authority was in a position to provide an ideal space at a lease rate that would allow the quickly growing company to meet their capital needs," said Sara Marrs, director of the Athens County Economic Development Council. "It's exciting to get to see them reaching (their) potential and know that we had a small part in helping them get there."

The new-product award is by the International Society for Biological and Environmental Repositories. It "recognizes the company's development and introduction of the world's most energy-efficient ultra-low temperature freezer, the Stirling Ultracold SU780U."

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The SU780U went on sale Jan. 1. It lists for \$18,500 and is used for long-term storage of biologicals and other life forms in support of medical research, stem-cell therapy, and pharmaceutical development. It's about the size of a household refrigerator (27.5 cu. ft. capacity) and operates at minus-80 degrees centigrade.

Its major selling point is the promise "to dramatically reduce high energy and operating costs." The new freezer uses a free-piston Stirling engine as an alternative to the less-efficient cascade refrigeration systems used in all competing products.

Cascade systems use oil-lubricated compressors, while the Stirling engine operates with gas bearings that eliminate all wear.

The freezer and cooling engine are both 100 percent manufactured at the Athens County facility. "Our product is entirely U.S. made," said Lane, "and that's unusual in the freezer business."

In addition to the award-winning model, two other smaller models are made there, one that's transportable and another that's for under-counter or bench-top storage.

"In the next few years, we expect Global Cooling to become one of Athens County's largest employers," said Marrs. "And since they are a research and development oriented company, I expect we will continue to see new innovations from them that will transcend to the commercial market for years to come."

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