

# Wausau Daily Herald

## MONEY

# Rhineland, Mosinee mills convert from coal to natural gas with multimillion-dollar investment



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RHINELANDER – Ahlstrom finished converting its Rhinelander paper mill from coal to natural gas in late 2022, and the company says it expects to wrap up a similar project at its Mosinee pulp and paper mill next year.

The global Finnish company announced the investments last year, saying it would significantly reduce carbon emissions and landfill waste at both facilities. Ahlstrom is spending 15 million euros, or a little more than \$16 million, on the conversion projects, according to a company spokesperson.

In the meantime, both mills continued to operate as normal, the spokesperson said.

Ahlstrom produces specialty papers at its Kaukauna, De Pere, Rhinelander and Mosinee facilities, with just over 1,800 employees across Wisconsin.

## What did Ahlstrom change in Rhinelander?

Ahlstrom shuttered a coal-fired boiler at the Rhinelander mill and installed a new one powered by natural gas.

The project is essentially finished, the spokesperson said, and the new boiler is up and running as the company installs a few last minor items.

Ahlstrom predicted in 2022 that the switch would reduce Rhinelander's carbon dioxide emissions by roughly 14% and its landfill waste by more than 50%. Since then, the mill has actually exceeded its goal because "natural gas has approximately 60% of the CO2 emissions as coal per unit of energy," according to the spokesperson.

Converting to natural gas also allowed Rhinelander to eliminate its generation of flyash, which previously ended up in landfills, according to the company.

"Flyash are the inert solids inherent to coal that are not converted to energy in the power generation process," the spokesperson said.

The facility still produces some landfill waste which cannot be reused in the manufacturing process or is not readily recyclable, such as silicone coated papers, packaging waste and general debris. Rhinelander uses commercial haulers and commercial disposal facilities to handle these, according to Ahlstrom.

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## What's happening at Mosinee?

Like Rhinelander, Mosinee will also idle a coal-fired boiler and install a natural gas boiler.

The company originally expected to finish the project this year, but it was delayed to April 2024 due to the delivery timeline for the boiler, the spokesperson said.

Ahlstrom estimates the move will reduce Mosinee's carbon footprint by about 20% and reduce its landfill waste by more than 10%.

## Why did Ahlstrom make these investments?

Last year, Ahlstrom updated its sustainability targets, and the company committed to The Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), a global partnership that helps businesses set emissions reduction targets that are in line with new climate targets, according to a company news release in August 2022.

Ahlstrom plans to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions 38% by 2030, and it "aspires to reach net zero emissions by 2050," Robin Guillaud, Ahlstrom's then-executive vice president of sustainability, innovation and marketing, who has since left the company, said in the release.

The investments at the Rhinelander and Mosinee plants are "a significant step" in achieving the company's "ambitious" goals, according to Guillaud.

Ahlstrom said it "will continue to implement future sustainability projects in years to come." For instance, the company is considering investing in a heat recovery steam generator in

Rhinelander, but there are no definite plans, a spokesperson said.

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## **What other air quality efforts has Ahlstrom made in Wisconsin?**

Last year, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced that through collaborative efforts, the Rhinelander area had met the most recent federal air quality standard for sulfur dioxide.

The DNR worked closely with Ahlstrom's Rhinelander mill, which was "the facility primarily responsible for sulfur dioxide emissions in the area," according to a January 2022 news release.

"This area's sulfur dioxide concentrations have decreased substantially due to strict sulfur dioxide emission limits, retirement of four coal boilers, and reduced coal sulfur content" at Ahlstrom's paper mill, the EPA said at the time.

Ahlstrom's recent multimillion-dollar investment in Rhinelander is not related to this sulfur dioxide issue, but is instead part of the company's long-term environmental, social and governance goals, according to the spokesperson.

By converting from coal to natural gas, the Rhinelander facility is going "above and beyond our previous air quality efforts," the spokesperson said.

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