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Opcon enters fuel cell development project

In a move to strengthen its position as a world leader in screw compressors for fuel cells, Opcon Autorotor AB is now entering a major development project. The company will develop completely new components for air systems in co-operation with two other Swedish companies; NFO Drives AB and Kompositprodukter AB. The project will be worth an estimated SEK 8 million, of which Statens Energimyndighet, Sweden's energy authority, will contribute SEK 4 million. "Opcon has invested determinedly in the fuel cell market and this new project is completely in line with our strategy to contribute to the creation of environment-friendly power," says the Opcon Group's CEO, Sven G. Oskarsson.

Fuel cells are currently a very hot topic in the US. Shares of companies active in fuel cells are trading at record highs, with some company's shares now ten times higher than previous levels. Investors in Sweden have not yet discovered the only listed Swedish company with close links to the fuel cell industry - Opcon AB, whose subsidiary Opcon Autorotor AB in Nacka near Stockholm develops and produces the compressors that are used in fuel cells. "All of the world's major carmakers are currently developing fuel cell engines that contain air systems, usually including compressors. These are the key parts of the fuel cell because the air system has a decisive effect on performance. Today, Opcon is involved in most of the best known fuel cell projects in co-operation with the world's leading automakers," says Opcon Autorotor's managing director Roland Ärlebäck.

Next generation of engines

Fuel cells are expected to be the next generation of engines. They will meet the requirements of stricter environmental legislation and public demands for a cleaner environment and, in the longer term, provide an alternative to more expensive conventional fuel. Fuel cells generate energy when hydrogen gas reacts with oxygen. The only emission is pure water. The priorities in the development of fuel cells for commercial vehicles costing the same as traditional ones are to reduce cost, weight and volume. "We are very pleased to enter this project with two other Swedish companies. All three of us can exploit our leading-edge technology to create the compact systems that we know the fuel cell industry is demanding," says Sven G Oskarsson. "But we must move quickly. We must produce the system for the first commercially available vehicles, which could be reaching the market within two years. It is estimated that all vehicles will run on fuel cell engines within the next 25 years."

Lighter, smaller and cheaper

Each of the three companies owns key patents within their fields. In order to optimise the air system, the companies are coming together in order to design, test and produce a compact system. The different components will now be better integrated with each other. "Efficiency, weight, volume and cost are four very important factors when auto makers choose components. The aim is to develop a lighter, smaller and cheaper unit that has enhanced performance," says Roland Ärlebäck, who will lead the project. The cost of the project is estimated at SEK 8 million, and it has interested Statens Energimyndighet, Sweden's energy authority, so much that it has decided to contribute SEK 4 million. "Around SEK 10 billion is currently being invested globally in fuel cell development and we know that there is a huge future market for the product we want to develop," says Roland Ärlebäck.

A consortium is being formed by the following three companies: Opcon Autorotor AB, contributing knowledge of the development and production of double-screw compressors. Kompositprodukter AB, has special knowledge and experience of high speed engines. NFO Drives AB, has a patent for a method of building frequency transformers that produce a pure sine-wave voltage.

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