BMW to hire 500 more

X3 demand leads automaker to add more workers at plant in Greer

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BMW won't bring down the Upstate's persistently high unemployment numbers by itself, but the German automaker placed another big bet on its own fortunes Tuesday with word it would bring on another 500 contingency employees at its Greer assembly plant.

That's on top of 500 full-time contingent positions announced in July, and it comes as the Greer plant prepares to launch production of the X3 sports activity vehicle.

The new workers will be hired by MAU Inc., BMW's contract staffing partner. The staffing agency has been conducting numerous job fairs in Greenville and Spartanburg counties in recent weeks to fill the July positions.

It has been hiring about 65 people a week for the past eight or 10 weeks, said Bobby Hitt, BMW spokesman.

The additional workers at the Greer plant will be paid the same compensation of $15 an hour, with a $1 differential for the night shift, and a complete benefits package.

"As production of the new X3 gets underway and sales of the BMW X5 and X6 continue to do very well around the world, we see the need to expand our production team again to ensure we are well prepared to meet our forecasted demand," said Josef Kerscher, BMW Manufacturing president.

"BMW happens to be in the admirable position of having a family of products that people want," said Bruce Yandle, dean emeritus of Clemson University's College of Business and Behavioral Science.

Hitt said that "the start of the building of the X3 is imminent. The market is continuing to show us strong demand on the X5 and X6 and the early read on the X3 is very good. We see the

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demand is still there."

Yandle said the news "is certainly a significant announcement, back to back," he said, "One thousand jobs — that is a large number. It's the kind of news we need more of. This is the kind of hiring that will enable South Carolina to close the gap between South Carolina's unemployment rate and the national rate."

He said the hiring is indicative of an improving auto market in both the United States and internationally, and he cited an A.T. Kearney report as indicating that the U.S. auto market should be back to about normal by 2012.

About 16.2 million vehicles were sold in the United States in 2007, dropping to 13.2 million in 2008. The market bottomed out in 2009 at 10.4 million vehicles. This year, sales estimates are 11.6 million. And the market should reach the 16 million range again in 2012.

"Employment growth (in the auto sector) has been high," Yandle said. "It's one of the stronger areas I've seen."

Hitt said the company has been pleased with the MAU contract workers who have been hired. They receive about three weeks of training and then start working.

"The process is working very well," he said.

BMW's launch of the X3 sports activity vehicle, which is being built in a new assembly plant on the BMW campus — part of a $750 million expansion that also includes updating of the paint and body shops — will start with one shift working, he said. Over the following weeks and months, a second shift can be added.

The company expects that the addition of the new jobs will bring the total number of workers at the BMW plant in South Carolina to more than 7,000 on site.

The X3, which was built in Austria during its first life cycle, has been a successful model for the automaker, Hitt said. The new X3 has some profound changes in technology, appearance and safety, he said, and that is normal for BMW vehicles.

BMW Manufacturing began production in 1994. The factory will celebrate its 16th production anniversary in South Carolina this month and has produced approximately 1.6 million vehicles since initial production.

BMW has exported more than1 million vehicles from its Upstate plant during this time span.

MAU is holding job fairs at the Greenville OneStop at the state Department of Employment and Workforce Greenville office from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 9, Sept. 15 and Sept. 22.

Qualified applicants are encouraged to attend one of the job fairs. They also can apply online and find more information about the job fairs. Job fairs will be held in Spartanburg after renovations at Tyger River campus of Spartanburg Community College are complete.