

Firestone planning air springs unit in India

By K. Gopalakrishnan

The name Firestone is not new to the Indian market. The Firestone brand of tyres were sold in India for a very long-time. Globally Firestone is now part of the Bridgestone Corporation.

Firestone Industrial Products (FSIP), the non-tyre products group has over the last 50 years done pioneering work in the development and manufacture of various rubber products, including air springs for automotive and industrial applications.

Mr. Arun Kumar, Marketing Director & Head of Asian Businesses, FSIP recently spoke to MOTORINDIA about the company's plans for the Indian market. From a modest beginning in the late 1920s, this division of Bridgestone Firestone Diversified Products, LLC (Bridgestone Firestone) has made big strides having grown to enjoy a 36 per cent share of the worldwide air spring market. Because of its success in designing and manufacturing air springs for the international transportation industry and for a range of industrial applications, FSIP has emerged a global company in its own right.

He said: "FSIP has grown from a single plant in Indiana to a multinational manufacturing and distribution company. FSIP has designed and built air springs for more applications than any other air spring company in the world, and with manufacturing and technological capabilities in the four Continents, FSIP has become the world's leading air spring supplier".

Indian market

In India, mechanical leaf spring suspension was being traditionally used on trucks and buses. A decade ago, air suspension systems were introduced in the luxury bus segment. Now this



Mr. Arun Kumar, Marketing Director & Head of Asian Businesses

has almost become a standard fitment in most of the luxury buses built in the country.

Mr. Arun said: "We have been selling air springs in the Indian market for more than 15 years through our distributor, Gibraltar Agencies. Currently, we are doing business worth \$10 million per annum."

There has been exponential growth in demand for the product in the last few years, primarily from the luxury bus segment. Encouraged by the positive response, FSIP has set up an office in Gurgaon and is getting together a sales and service team to improve the business and provide better service to its customers.

He also disclosed that headquartered in Indiana, FSIP, with approximately 1,200 associates globally, operates manufacturing facilities in Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee in the US, and outside the US it has manufacturing plants in Brazil and Poland and also an assembly line in China. "We are looking at the possibility of setting

up a facility for manufacture of air springs in the Asian region, in the next few years. We are also looking at the Indian market closely. We have just established an office in Gurgaon and will shortly set up a warehouse for our products, and as the market matures we might decide to set up our manufacturing facility in India. We are also planning to set up an engineering or tech centre in India".

Mr. Arun Kumar added that his company is very excited to be part of the infrastructure development in India. The country really offers a vast market for the company products in view of the expanding infrastructure development activities.

FSIP manufactures air springs, which is a critical component for the air suspension system. The company enjoys 36 per cent marketshare for airsprings worldwide. Major consumption segments are trucks, buses, trailers, passenger cars, railways & industrial segment.

The company has been devoting

considerable time and making special efforts towards developing products designed for Indian railways, and is expecting fairly good orders in the coming years.

Mr. Arun Kumar further said that in the Indian automotive sector, his company is initially offering airsprings for the luxury bus segment. It is currently catering to the replacement market and to some bus body builders. It has also initiated discussion with truck and bus manufacturers for OEM supplies.

Business in China

With a 67 per cent marketshare in the US and around 20 per cent in Europe, FSIP has been selling its products in China for more than 10 years through an OEM customer there. Its assembly unit in China mainly caters to the local market, and the long-term plan includes setting up of a local manufacturing there.

Most of the air springs FSIP makes are Airide springs for trucks, trailers and bus suspensions. More than half of the trucks on the road today, the worldover, with air suspensions have Firestone brand Airide springs. Marketing research has established that Firestone is the best known brand of air spring in the world.

According to Mr. Arun Kumar, Globally FSIP has been growing by more than 10 per cent. The growth is across all markets. Particularly emerging markets are showing a higher growth rate.

A decision to set up a manufacturing facility in India will be taken in the next couple of years, after waiting to see that the market has matured. Once set up, the manufacturing plant will not only cater to the local market but to

other Asian markets as well.

The tech centre is another initiative FSIP is planning in India. The objective here is to remain close to customers and develop solutions to suit their needs. With its commendable success in tropical countries, including Liberia where it has its own rubber plantations, the company is very confident about market prospects in India.

He said: "Studies conducted world-

In India FSIP is in discussion with all the major OEMs in India and with suspension system manufacturers like Wheels India, Madras Suspensions and other companies for OEM supplies.

Quality Awards

Globally FSIP has received the highly esteemed Supplier Quality Certification from Paccar. This Seattle-based manufacturer of Peterbilt and Kenworth

heavy-duty trucks presented the award in recognition of the company's efforts in fulfilling its Quality Certification program requirements.

On the heavy-duty truck side, the company has received Certified Supplier and Master of Quality designations from Freightliner and the 5 Star Award as a Strategic Alliance Partner from Sears Manufacturing, turning out air suspended seats. In the automotive segment, FSIP continues to be a Ford Motor Company Q1 Preferred Supplier.

Further, FSIP operations have achieved ISO 9000 and QS 9000 certification. Approval of TS-16949 certification is in the offing.

Research and engineering have always been the cornerstone of FSIP functioning. The engineering department utilizes state-of-the-art CAD-FEA equipment and processes for product development. Firestone's recent R&D investments include those on a 6 degree-of-freedom tester as well as a high frequency machine designed to test harshness with a cycle rate of up to 500 Hz. These tools help the company optimize air spring designs to meet customer needs. ♦



Air springs are highly engineered elastomeric bellows with specially designed metal end closures that contain a column of compressed air. The bellow itself is made of calendered rubber and high-strength, fabric-reinforced rubber.

wide suggest that usage of air suspension systems helps increase the life of roads. When the government is investing so much on roads and highways, I would expect some legislation to come in the near future making it a mandatory fitment."

The secret of Firestone's phenomenal growth is its policy of providing a high level of customer support right from designing to the actual fitment and performance of product.