

“Toyota praise sold firm on WV”
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By: George Hohmann
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Fraziers Bottom – The grand opening of Nippon Thermostat of America Corp., the most recent Japanese company to invest in West Virginia, was scheduled today with a ceremony in the Putnam Business Park. Nippon thermostat makes devices that are critical in keeping vehicle engines cool. The company’s Putnam County plant will begin production in October for Toyota’s plant in Georgetown, Ky., and will begin production in 2006 for Toyota’s plant across the Kanawha River in Buffalo, said plant manager Takahiro Iwaki.

The Putnam county plant is expected to produce 200,000 thermostats in 2006 and 400,000 in 2007, Iwaki said. The plant currently has six employees – Iwaki, who is an engineer, and two others from Japan plus three employees hired locally. Iwaki said he expects to hire three or four more people when production starts. He hopes to have a staff of about 40 within a couple of years. Employees are being hired through the West Virginia Job Service. Iwaki said that when Nippon Thermostat began looking for a North American location two years ago, it considered sites in Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia. The company picked West Virginia because employees with Toyota in Japan had high praise for Toyota’s West Virginia workers. “They told us their West Virginia workers were very good with their hands and we deal with a lot of small parts,” Iwaki said. “They also told us West Virginians are hard workers.”

The state’s low crime rate and ample labor force also were positive features that played into Nippon Thermostat’s decision to settle in West Virginia, Iwaki said. The Putnam County plant’s 38,000 square feet of space includes 26,000 square feet of manufacturing space and 12,000 square feet of offices and conference rooms. Most of the manufacturing space is currently empty. Employees have set up one production machine and have marked off space for two more. Iwaki said parts assembled in Putnam County will mostly come from Japan at first but the plan is to eventually have local suppliers.

Ground for the plant was broken in July 2003. One of the reasons for the lag time between the groundbreaking and today’s opening was the construction of an access road. The plant sits off U.S. 35, behind a Tasty Blend factory that is under construction. Nippon Thermostat is headquartered in Tokyo. The company has about 55 percent of the vehicle thermostat market in Japan and about 17 percent of the market worldwide, Iwaki said. Dignitaries scheduled to attend today’s event include Sen. Jay Rockefeller, Gov. Joe Manchin, Toyota Motor Manufacturing West Virginia President Yutaka Mizuno and Vice President David Copenhaver, Putnam County Commissioner Jim Caruthers, and Putnam County Development Authority Executive Director Gary Walton. A total of about 100 invited guests were expected for the late morning ceremony.

