

African Oxygen (Afrox) officially unveiled its flagship R60-million filling and engineering services hub at Riverhorse Valley to the north of Durban on Friday. The 18 000 m² site is home to a one-stop-shop for Argoshield, carbon dioxide, nitrogen, helium, medical and food-grade gases, as well as portable cryogenic containers, Afrox MD Schalk Venter explained.

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Engineered to international standards and designed to comply with global best practice, the new Afrox hub has a filling capacity of 22 000 cylinders a month, 15% more than its predecessor at Maydon Wharf.

It includes a fully stocked warehouse, customer engineering services department, service engineering department and a fleet of ten distribution vehicles.

Speaking at the launch on Friday, head of operations **IB Marais** said the new facility had been commissioned just over a month ago. Construction began in November 2015.

He said the decision to embark on a greenfield development at Riverhorse Valley rather than upgrade the existing aged one at the Durban port was based on a need to update technology, improve operational efficiencies and meet international quality and safety standards.

Even though it was still early days, he said operational efficiency had already improved by at least 15%, with further progress expected in future.

The facility was designed to streamline and maximise the synergies between various departments.

The “heart of the hub” is programmable logic controller-automated cylinder filling technology.

New technology allows for the on-site mixing of gases and the possible introduction of new products. Products such as shielding gases no longer need to be trucked to Durban from Johannesburg.

The Riverhorse Valley hub is also supported by a fully equipped on-site cylinder test shop, ensuring that high-pressure gas cylinders are maintained and hydrostatically tested to legal requirements.

Prior to its commissioning, testing and repairs were done in Johannesburg.

A new state-of-the-art medical filling plant that is independent of the industrial filling hub, as stipulated by international safety regulations, is located at the entrance to the facility.

Marais pointed out that diesel forklifts had been replaced with battery-powered units which, together with the installation of silencers to minimise blow-down noise, had dramatically reduced noise within the plant.

“With this new investment in KwaZulu-Natal, our supplies of Handigas liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) via our Pinetown operations are guaranteed with added support from imported product into the Bidvest Tank Terminal in Richards Bay, where upgraded road and rail links ensure that Afrox can deliver its LPG in bulk,” Venter added.

He said that, initially, there were plans to build a new air separation unit at Riverhorse Valley.

However, this part of the project had been put on hold as the depressed economy meant that demand could still be filled from the existing facility in Pinetown.

Nevertheless, he said the new facility was an investment in the economy of the region and was specifically targeted at customers in strategic growth industries within the food and beverage, medical, hospitality and industrial sectors.

Marais said the success of the Durban hub enabled the company to confidently upgrade sites in both Cape Town and Port Elizabeth in the near future. Planning was complete and work at the Cape Town facility could begin towards the end of 2017 with the Port Elizabeth facility to follow in 2018.