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FRAUENFELD-WIL-BAHN PLACE A SPECIAL ORDER

Frauenfeld-Wil-Bahn

Ron Smith reports on this small railway in the NE of Switzerland and its links with Stadler

FW's 1985 Be4/4 railcar No14, plus driving trailer No114, waiting at the Wil station terminus. The 'Red Zebra' livery is also carried by the building! 24th June 2009. PHOTO: by Ron Smith

The Frauenfeld-Wil-Bahn (FW) is a roadside tramway that runs for almost all of its 17km length through the gentle countryside of Kanton Thurgau, one of the least visited of Switzerland's regions, before it finally enters Kanton St Gallen to terminate at its own platforms alongside Wil SBB station. In Frauenfeld the line starts from the middle of the square outside the station on the Winterthur –Romanshorn line and runs as a tramway on the streets of the Kanton's busy capital. The metre-gauge FW was opened on the 1st Sept. 1887, and was electrified at 1,200 V dc in 1921. Although threatened with closure at one time, it is currently carrying more passengers than ever (some 1.2m annually) on its basic half-hourly service. This is operated with seven Be4/4 railcars, five dating from 1985 and two built by Stadler in 1992. The line also has a number of trailers for use in busy periods and with the growth in passenger numbers operating capacity has become a major problem.

To increase capacity the FW have just awarded Stadler a CHF31m order for the supply of five 3-car articulated ABe4/8 110-seat units for delivery in 2013. These new sets are similar to the 'Diamant' units that Stadler recently delivered to the Bremgarten Dietikon Wohlen Meisterschwanden Bahn (BDWM). They will have the specific requirements of extra front end crash worthiness, the ability to traverse the tight curves of the FW, electro-magnetic rail brakes, air conditioning, and low floor sections along with a first class compartment. Apart from the general improvements the new stock will provide it is probable that its entry into service will see the retirement of the 1985-built units. Interestingly the artist's impression used by Stadler at their press launch shows the new trains in a very restrained dark grey, light grey and red livery, a far cry from the crazy 'Red Zebra' colours the line currently uses. These new colours reflect the influence of the Appenzellerbahnen with whom the FW is now linked.

Stadler is based in nearby Bussnang and are now one of the largest employers in Kanton Thurgau. In 1989 Peter Spuhler, CEO and owner of the Stadler Rail Group took over the then moribund company that had just 18 employees and has very successfully turned it into a major international player in railway rolling stock construction. Speaking in June he said; "This order in our home cantons Thurgau and St. Gallen means a great deal to me personally. On the one hand, I am filled with pride that in future the very latest Light Rail Vehicles from the Stadler factory will be in operation in our immediate environment. On the other hand, it is a particularly special moment for me personally, to receive an order from my very first customer once again after 20 years. In 1991 FW put their faith in us and ordered two new trains and by doing so, they contributed to our success right from the very beginning."

First figures show that 2010 was a remarkably successful year for Spuhler's company with turnover reaching CHF1.077m, 38 % more than in the previous year. Apart from the small FW order Stadler have some CHF2,870m of new orders in-hand, with rolling stock being built for operators in Switzerland, Luxembourg, Norway, Austria, Belorussia, Finland, Estonia, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany and Brazil. In addition to its HQ at Bussnang the company now have other production facilities in Switzerland, Germany and Poland, with a plant recently being opened in the USA, following sales to New Jersey and Texas. Another is now planned in India. For 2011 turnover should reach CHF1,450m with production capacity committed until 2013. The strong Swiss Franc creates an obstacle to sales in the future, but Stadler is now a much diversified organization buying many components and sub-assemblies in the Euro-Zone even for its Swiss production.

Editor's note: Additional information was supplied by Bryan Stone and Jakob Jäger. 