Ford will make ventilators for GE, joining General Motors

Ford is the latest automaker to announce that it will start making desperately needed ventilators that are crucial for treating the worst symptoms of COVID-19. The automaker announced Monday that it will manufacture ventilators for General Electric's health care division, which has licensed a "simplified" design that does not need electricity from a Florida ventilator company called Airon – and one that is already approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Ford has already been working with GE to increase production of its own ventilators, and will soon start helping Airon increase the company's production capacity in Florida. The automaker is already helping make masks and protective hoods for health care workers.

Ford will pay 500 United Auto Workers-represented volunteer employees to build the ventilators at one of the automaker's components factories in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which is currently shut down due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The company will build the ventilators "around the clock" starting the week of April 20th. Ford says it expects to be able to build 1,500 of them by the end of April, 12,000 by the end of May, and 50,000 by July, eventually reaching a rate of 30,000 per month.

The ventilator doesn't need electricity, and Ford says it can make a lot of them

Adrian Price, director of Ford's global manufacturing core engineering division, said Ford and GE Healthcare believe the

unpowered ventilator design is “absolutely robust in terms of its capability.” Perhaps more importantly, Price said it’s a simple design that can be quickly scaled up.

When it comes to protecting the workers who will build the ventilators, Ford says it’s working with the UAW to make sure they’re properly screened and set far enough apart so they don’t risk spreading the novel coronavirus. The company will also use barriers, shields and protective devices as well. Price said the automaker is “also looking at deploying some new technology that can can help us in in the fight on COVID,” but did not go into any further detail. Ford has already lost two employees to COVID-19 in the US, and fellow Detroit automaker Fiat Chrysler has lost four.

Ford joins fellow Detroit automaker General Motors in helping make ventilators, which are expected to be in short supply as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to rise in the US and around the world. GM announced on Friday that it will start manufacturing more complicated ventilators in April on behalf of Ventec Life Systems, hours before President Trump announced he was invoking the Korean War-era Defense Production Act to force the automaker to help with the shortage. GM plans to eventually make 10,000 powered ventilators per month, but will start with “hundreds” in April, according to Ventec.

Tesla and Virgin are also working on sourcing and building ventilators and similar equipment to fight COVID-19

Tesla is also examining how to help manufacture ventilators for a company called Medtronic, and has even bought some from China to send to hospitals in the meantime. Earlier on Monday, the rocket-launching arm of Richard Branson’s space company announced it has also developed a device that could help patients who are having trouble breathing due to COVID-19.

In response to the need for ventilators, as well as the economic impact of the pandemic, a number of workers in GE’s aviation division decided to protest cuts the company made on

Monday. The union workers called on the company to let them make ventilators instead. GE Healthcare is already a large manufacturer of ventilators.

When asked why GE Healthcare is tapping Ford to make these ventilators instead of its own workers, Tom Westrick, the division's vice president and chief quality officer, said: "Our decision to select Ford was based specifically on speed, and our ability to increase capacity as fast as we could."

Correction: *An earlier version of this story claimed the GE aviation workers stopped work. The protest happened outside the facility while they were off duty. We regret the error.*

https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/30/21200216/ford-ge-ventilators-coronavirus-covid-19-manufacturing