Brisbane-based Ferra Australia will build motors for Thales Phoenice tactical submarine navigation radar systems destined for a European customer, announcing a deal with Thales Germany last week after an 18-month Global Supply Chain selection process.

Ferra is initially contracted to provide two Primoss pressure-tight motors – self-contained systems around 1.1 metres high that are mounted outside a submarine’s pressure hull to drive the Phoenice radar antenna on the surface. The systems must be watertight at depth, and include a high-torque motor and complex control system to withstand wave slaps at different sea states without impairing the performance of the radar.

Ferra’s selection completes an 18-month process in which 10 SMEs in South Australia, Victoria and Queensland were initially issued technical drawings and invited to produce a test piece. After a visit from Thales Germany personnel, five companies were then shortlisted to submit Rough Order of Magnitude (ROM) pricing, which was found to be comparable to that of existing German suppliers.

Thales released a full Request For Quote (RFQ) in August 2016, with Ferra selected in June 2017. The company’s supplier team includes Queensland’s EM Solutions for complex electronic systems, and Adelaide’s Axiom Precision Manufacturing.

Ferra managing director Mark Arthur said the contract underlined both the company’s journey to becoming a provider of complex systems and the capabilities of Australian industry.

“We have grown quite significantly and the complexity of the work that we do has also changed and moved up the value chain,” Arthur told ADM. “And I think our supply chain, the fact that we have some very competent companies here in Australia who have their own very high reputations, offered something to Thales that was quite unique.”

He believes the expertise in both Ferra and the supplier companies will overcome any issues in producing a complex system that is critical to the Phoenice radar’s performance.

“This system, once fully assembled, is extremely complex and will require a large amount of testing, which includes...
mechanical and electrical testing as an entire system,” Arthur said. “That will be at a higher and a more complex level than what we have done in the past. But I think we’ve got the skills and experience available to us here, or reaching out in to our supply chain, to overcome those problems.”

Thales Industry Engagement Manager for Australia - France/Europe, David Peckham, said the Ferra partnership would open opportunities for both the European defence company and Australian SMEs.

“By establishing a regional partner and supply chain in Australia, Thales Germany aims to globalise its business and open up new markets,” he said. “There will also be opportunities for Ferra and other Australian companies to be involved in the upcoming redesigns of some of the components of the Phoenice radar system which are planned by Thales Germany for the next years.”