

Delegation aims to advance wind energy

In an unusual move, firms that want to do business in Europe focus on an industry, not a locale.

*By Ann S. Kim, Staff Writer
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The itinerary is packed for Maine participants in a renewable energy trade mission to Spain and Germany this week.

Briefings, a wind energy trade show, a tour of a turbine manufacturer, networking receptions and matchmaking sessions with possible business partners are all part of the trip organized by the Maine International Trade Center.

"It's full days," said Lisa Read, project manager of industrial products and services for Bath Iron Works.

The company, best known for building ships for the Navy, joined the gubernatorial trade mission to learn about the renewable energy market.

BIW is looking for related manufacturing opportunities, whether it's offshore platforms or the specialty vessels needed to serve them.

The trip, which wraps up Saturday, represents an opportunity to learn about the market while promoting the state to European leaders in the field, Read said from Madrid during a telephone interview Sunday.

"If there's going to be anything big in steel off the coast of Maine, that's our specialty so we want to be involved in it," said Read, part of a delegation of about two dozen business and industry representatives.

Founded in 1996, MITC serves Maine businesses that want to do business internationally. The center provides technical assistance, education and marketing and networking opportunities.

The nonprofit organization, with about 320 members, offers its services to all businesses in Maine. It is based in Portland and has an office in Bangor.

MITC was formed through the merger of the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development's international trade office and two private nonprofits, the Maine World Trade Association and the Maine Education and Training Export Partnership.

The state provides about \$525,000 of MITC's annual budget, which ranges between \$800,000 and \$1 million. The private sector provides the rest of the funding.

Today is the first full day of the trade mission. The trip's schedule includes the WindPower Expo in Zaragoza, Spain, on Tuesday and a tour of REpower, the turbine manufacturer, in Bremerhaven, Germany, on Thursday.

This mission is unusual because of its focus on an industry rather than a geographic area. A mission to Canada last year and a follow-up report on alternative energy helped generate interest in a renewable energy mission among Maine businesses, said Janine Bisaillon-Cary, MITC's president.

At the same time, Gov. John Baldacci wanted to make it a focus of this year's mission, she said.

"We have a couple of people who are prospecting and looking for this to be part of their business plan moving forward," Bisaillon-Cary said of the delegation.

"The majority of them have been involved in wind projects and also have been great in terms of reaching out."

Although trade missions may be MITC's most high-profile activity, much of its work is serving as an information resource to Maine businesses.

Mark Eichenbaum, chief executive officer of The Bagpler Co., based in Augusta, went to MITC to seek clarification about manufacturing requirements. His three-employee business makes reusable shopping bags and a plastic device to carry shopping bags.

"They saved me a great deal of time," Eichenbaum said of the MITC staff. "First of all, it was easy for me to communicate with them. I found them to be accessible and competent. That gave me great encouragement."

Eichenbaum was part of the delegation to a 2007 gubernatorial trade mission to Japan and South Korea, where he was able to make connections and generate orders.

The company now exports to 20 countries.

MITC Vice President Wade Merritt has seen how client needs and interests have evolved since he joined the organization shortly after its founding.

In the early days, it was necessary to do a lot of outreach to explain why Maine businesses should consider the international market, he said.

"Everybody's sort of gotten the message now – or many have," he said.

The idea of exports has also changed.

Service providers have become part of the client mix, so it's not only manufacturers looking to market their products abroad.

One of these new areas is education.

Merritt said MITC's contacts overseas can help town academies, colleges and universities reach out to potential students from different areas.

"It's still considered an export of educational services, if you, say, bring in a student from Korea to study," he explained.

Staff Writer Ann S. Kim can be contacted at 791-6383 or at akim@pressherald.com.

Matt Wickenheiser, who covers state government issues, will be reporting from Europe on the trip for the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, the Kennebec Journal and the Morning Sentinel in Waterville. "This trade mission is significant because it represents leadership at the executive level of state government with Gov. John Baldacci and with members of the business community to reach out to foreign countries and explore partnership opportunities," said Richard L. Connor, CEO and president of MaineToday Media. "Matt Wickenheiser's reporting will appear in all of our three daily and Sunday newspapers," said Connor. "We want our readers to know how important we believe it is for us to be the primary source of state government reporting. This is a start, a beginning, not the end." Wickenheiser also will be filing online reports to all three newspaper's Web sites. He also will be reporting via Twitter; follow his tweets at MWickenheiser.

TRADE MISSION DELEGATION

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ANDREW BOND, Bath Iron Works Corp.
LISA READ, Bath Iron Works Corp.
ERNIE KILBRIDE, Cianbro Corp.
PETER CIANCHETTE, Cianbro Corp.
PATRICK GRAHAM, James W. Sewall Co.
NANCY LARKIN, Larkin Enterprises Inc.
RICHARD LARKIN, Larkin Enterprises Inc.
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