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Maine companies anticipate growth in South America following trade mission

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PORTLAND, Maine — It's too early to start tallying sales from a recent trade mission to Brazil and Chile, but Maine businessmen said they were kept busy and anticipate growing their exports to those markets.

Eleven companies took part in the trade mission led by the Maine International Trade Center. The mission ran Nov. 12-19.

Falmouth-based Southworth International Group President Brian McNamara skipped the part of the trip through Chile, focusing on Brazil. The company makes material-handling equipment used in manufacturing to position products as they're being made. They also make platforms to hold workers as they construct large items such as jetliners.

Southworth targeted manufacturing companies in Brazil, aided by the MITC's matchmaking work with local trade experts.

"They were able to open up some doors we weren't able to get into in the past," McNamara said. "It's that little bit of an edge."

One of those doors was aircraft maker Embraer, McNamara said. He anticipated a quick meeting at Embraer, but was with company officials for almost three hours.

"There's no guarantees on the follow-up, but we know we'll have an opportunity to quote them in the future," he said.

Southworth already does some exporting to Brazil, but that may expand following the mission, McNamara said. The company employs about 200, with just under half in Maine.

"We can't always export to Brazil, but when the Brazilian economy is strong, when the dollar-real situation is favorable in terms of exchange rates, it opens up opportunities," he said.

Stephen Hides, CEO of Portland's Hydro International, said his company has started expanding south of the border and began working in Mexico about a year ago. The company, which makes

a variety of storm water and wastewater infrastructure pieces, has done a bit of work in Brazil, but the mission “provided a focal point for us to formalize the effort, really,” Hides said.

“It’s such a booming economy down there, fueled by the thirst for raw materials coming out of China and the like,” he said.

The interest exists in both Chile and Brazil to develop environmental standards based on what the United States has done, Hides said. The trip allowed him to start talking with officials there and share ideas for tackling some of the problems the countries are facing. Sales in the environmental sector take a while, with results possibly coming in a year or a year and a half, he noted.

“You start sowing these seeds basically,” Hides said.

Janine Bisailon-Cary, MITC president, said there were 105 matchmaking meetings for the companies, a large number for 11 firms. Brazil can be a challenging market to export to, she said, in terms of customs laws, duties and certain certificate requirements. But all of the companies on the mission were experienced exporters looking to expand their international markets, she said.

Bill Putnam, executive vice president at Yale Cordage in Saco, said he went on the trip because both Chile and Brazil presented opportunities for his company. Yale Cordage makes a wide variety of ropes for industrial, commercial, recreational and other markets. It employs 70 people in Saco.

The Chilean market presented opportunities in the mining sector as well as in aquaculture, he said. Brazil had areas to focus on including off-shore oil rig production and services.

The opportunity to break into a new geographic market with aid from MITC was invaluable, Putnam said, particularly with the organization’s advance work, translation help and overall scheduling.

And the reason for looking at South America is pretty basic, Putnam said.

“It is a global economy — we sell products around the world, and our competitors sell products around the world. To them, it’s exporting to the United States,” Putnam said. “We need to be competitive worldwide.”