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New grants available for exporters

By Rebecca Goldfine

Many more Maine companies may now be eligible for a new pot of federal money designed to help small exporters develop overseas markets.

The Maine International Trade Center, based in Portland, last week unveiled the new federal funding program for companies with fewer than 1,500 employees and under \$35 million in annual revenue, according to tentative guidelines set by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Most helpfully, according to MITC, is that these companies don't have to be in the food or agricultural business,

which has been the typical target of federal trade support in the past. "We haven't had any grant programs for exporting companies that are not in the agricultural realm," says Wade Merritt, MITC's vice president. "It's the first of its kind."

The program, called the State Trade and Export Promotion (STEP) Pilot Grant Initiative, this fall doled out \$30 million to 47 states and several territories. The program was authorized in 2010 and aligns with President Obama's goal to double U.S. exports in five years and create two million jobs, according to a press release from the SBA. Money for this pilot program has been appropriated for two years and authorized for a third, according to Merritt.



Wade Merritt, vice president of the Maine International Trade Center, talks about its new funding program to help companies do business globally

Maine has received \$146,000. Merritt says the funding will be used for several initiatives, including a reimbursement program for Maine companies attending trade shows and missions or using overseas matchmaking services to connect with potential customers, distributors or sales agents. Expenses like translation services and some shipment costs may also be included in the reimbursements. The amount per company is capped at \$2,000 annually.

MITC will also use the federal money to buy new video-conferencing technology at MITC's Congress Street headquarters, giving Maine businesses the ability to speak with companies around the world. And MITC plans to subscribe to a U.S. database called PIERS that tracks what's being shipped into the country, what's going out and which companies are buying what, according to Merritt. Lastly, the funding will pay for joint booth space for Maine exporters at two or three international trade shows next spring, possibly including a seafood fair in Brussels and a gift show in Toronto.

At the same time, MITC has developed a separate fund to reimburse travel expenses. MITC President Janine Bisailon-Cary says she has \$20,000 to give \$1,000 grants to 20 companies to cover costs such as airfare and hotels. The money will be available Dec. 1 for MITC members that are using an international matchmaking service or attending a foreign trade show; companies can't just be going on a business trip, Merritt says. "We don't need to give them \$4,000 to go on a trade mission -- \$1,000 is sometimes enough," he says. "These small grants can sometimes be the difference between a company going or not going."

A stipulation to the travel grant is that Maine companies be exploring new markets, Bisailon-Cary says. "We want companies to use this money to stretch [themselves] a little bit," she explains. "If you've done MEDICA (a biotech trade show in Germany) for the last five years, we want you to go to [Israel or China]. We want you to use these funds to get into a new market."

For both grant programs, companies must apply 60 days before traveling, and submit invoices within 60 days of returning. Applications are available by contacting [MITC](#).

Both Merritt and Bisailon-Cary warn that the grant programs might not continue after the trial phase, and will only continue if there's available money and companies have used the funding successfully. "We're counting on Maine businesses using it, getting the word out, using it creatively and getting back to us on their success," Bisailon-Cary says. "It's not a huge amount of money to start with, but it will be good for us."