

Tech sector attracts trade groups

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Andre Oliveira from the Brazilian company Verus Madasa recently participated in an international summit at Idexx in Westbrook.

A rush of trade delegations from around the world have recently toured Maine, lured not so much by export commodities but rather by Maine's growing technology assets.

Business leaders, government officials and academics from Japan's Aomori Prefecture arrived earlier this month to exchange ideas on alternative energy, aquaculture and tourism. The Japanese delegation arrived just after a group of 30 Brazilian dairy producers, professors and students toured southern Maine's dairy industry as part of a summit organized by Westbrook biotech firm Idexx Laboratories and the company's Brazilian distributor, Verus Madasa.

The influx of foreign trade delegations will continue later this month when a group from New Brunswick, Canada, visits Bangor and Portland, with interests weighted toward technology, says Perry Newman, president of Portland consulting firm Atlantica, who is arranging the visit.

"Historically, we've reached out to the natural resources-based industries, such as value-added wood products," says Newman, who has organized the cross-border trade visit for five years.

“But this year, I encouraged them to focus on technology opportunities. The take-up has been very good. For the New Brunswick companies with an IT, security or software focus, they have very full dance cards.”

For Maine businesses, such trade missions are a valuable part of establishing professional connections, sharing ideas and expanding into international markets, according to Wade Merritt, vice president of the Maine International Trade Center. “People can look at websites and marketing materials on Maine as a place to invest, but the best thing we can do is have international delegations and foreign companies come see it for themselves,” he says.

Merritt says that while the state’s export numbers are largely driven by a few marquee companies, trade delegations offer the chance to highlight Maine’s smaller industries. Over 80% of MITC’s members have 200 employees or fewer. “They’re not big players,” says Merritt.

Large firms like Fairchild Semiconductor, National Semiconductor and Idexx make up a majority of the technology exported from the state, but there’s growing support to sell foreign investors on the state’s merits as a hub for renewable energy technology.

“I think our tidal and wind power technologies are supremely exportable. What comes out of the ocean applies to everyone in the world,” says John Spritz, executive director of TechMaine, a trade association for the state’s tech companies.

Spritz points to Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences in West Boothbay Harbor and Portland’s Ocean Renewable Power Co. as two leaders in Maine’s burgeoning renewable energy industry. The Aomori group visited ORPC’s facility in Eastport to see the company’s tidal turbine generator units.

Visits from trade delegations offer Maine companies the chance to rework the image of the state’s technology sector. “I think people throughout the U.S. and the world typify us as good at crafting small, elegant solutions, but we’re much more than that. In general, the state of Maine can do a better job presenting to the outside world what our technical capacity is,” says Spritz.

Organized by the Maine Aomori Sister State Advisory Council, the tour divided the delegation into groups focusing on fisheries and aquaculture, energy and food production, with stops at Portland’s Gulf of Maine Research Institute, MITC, the University of Maine’s Offshore Wind Laboratory, the Maine Aquaculture Association and the Maine Shellfish Growers.

Maine’s burgeoning renewable energy sector, with its focus on emerging green and ocean-based technologies, was of particular interest to the Japanese following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster last March.

“I think this recent nuclear issue is making Japan more interested in looking at alternatives. They have the same issues as us: very cold winters, very petroleum-based [heating] for homes, so they are looking to diversify as well,” says Maine Aomori Sister State Advisory Council Chairman Steve MacDougall.

“The Maine International Trade Center has hosted several companies that have come through to look at the technology we’ve developed around natural resources and renewable power. My gut tells me that we carved out good niches and we’ve marketed those niches well,” says Merritt.

Innovation at the fore

Earlier this month, the Brazilian delegation of dairy producers, professors and students visited Oakhurst Dairy, Pineland Farms, and Idexx to share best processing practices and learn more about Idexx’s dairy diagnostic technologies. The company’s SNAP brand of dairy tests has been used in Brazil for 17 years.

Brazil is the state’s 11th largest export partner, with \$32 million in trade according to MITC, but is poised for some rapid growth, says Ali Naqui, a corporate vice president at Idexx. “Brazil’s economy is booming; it’s a very important market for us,” says Naqui. “We’re interested in working hard to grow our business in Brazil. I think this conference has been a great event in that process.”

The South American country will be the destination of a Maine trade group leaving Nov. 12. The group will visit Chile as well. Although dubbed a gubernatorial trade mission, Gov. Paul LePage will not be participating, citing responsibilities in Augusta. The focus of the mission is to consider export opportunities in energy, environmental technology, education, processing and packaging, and to draw foreign investment to Maine.

Newman says he encouraged the New Brunswick delegation to focus on technology because the traditional, natural-resource industries are a tougher sell with the strong Canadian dollar.

“Technology is an area of great potential,” says Newman. “Maine business, particularly in the IT sector, are busy, and are highly collaborative, and New Brunswick has skilled people doing similar things, but with a smaller local market to sell to. So there’s potential partnership between Maine businesses that might need human resources and the New Brunswick companies’ need for an expanded market.”

The six companies confirmed so far for the Maine visit represent software; energy and environmental science; security; R&D testing, as well as a food franchiser and an emergency tree removal business.