

“Delegation arrives in Osaka”

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Osaka, Japan – Balmy mid-80 degree weather greeted Gov. Joe Manchin and a group of West Virginia business leaders, ambassadors, members of the press, and a state trooper at Osaka’s Kansai International Airport on Saturday afternoon.

Saturday was the first day of the group’s nine-day tour of Japan. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-WV, is in Taiwan on business and will join the group Tuesday morning. The Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation and West Virginia Development Office are sponsoring everything on the trip except hotels and airfare. In preparation for the trip Manchin said he had talked with Japanese companies that have opened West Virginia facilities about trying to attract their suppliers to the state. He said he thought West Virginia also would be a good fit for Toyota to add engine and transmission plants that make equipment for hybrids.

“That’s the direction the country and world is going in,” he told Alexander Almasov, the U.S. consul general in Osaka over a group dinner of raw fish and meat dishes. About 8 million people live in Osaka, which makes it Japan’s third largest city. This city in the western part of the island nation was the economic center of light and heavy industry for centuries. The country’s retail business also developed in Osaka, Almasov said. In the past 15 years, capital city Tokyo has become more of the country’s economic center. Osaka also has taken longer than other regions to recover from the recession Japan has been in for 15 years. But, home electronics companies like Sanyo and Sharp have sprung back and the region’s pharmaceutical industry has regained its that could reap the benefits. The company is economic health, he said. Four pharmaceutical companies are based in the region and have grown tremendously over the past three to four years, mainly by selling and investing in the United States.

“Governor, that might be an area you want to look at for future investment into West Virginia,” Almasov said. He also pointed out that the Ohio River Valley is now the center of the Japanese automobile industry in the United States. “West Virginia is well on the way in taking advantage of that fact, and I think that such efforts as this delegation...promise a very, very bright future for economic cooperation between Japan and West Virginia, and all of the United States,” Almasov said. But the Mountain State wasn’t always on Japan’s radar screen.

About 10 years ago, Rockefeller’s chief of staff, Lane Bailey, watched the senator try to persuade Toyota executives to open a plant in West Virginia. “It was fascinating to hear Jay talk about West Virginia...the reality was what the Japanese knew about West Virginia wasn’t negative, they didn’t know anything about the state, positive or negative,” Bailey said during a pre-trip interview. One man was unimpressed about the Mountain State, so he pulled out a map, laid it on the table and wanted to know where the

state was. “The executive pointed to Virginia and Jay literally lifted his hand up and pointed it to West Virginia,” Bailey said. It was that kind of lack of information about West Virginia that led Rockefeller to create the Discover the Real West Virginia foundation in 1988 and incorporate the nonprofit group in 1993.

“I started it because I didn’t feel that the state of West Virginia was doing enough international business development or that we were being aggressive in some ways that we could be aggressive,” Rockefeller said earlier. “Everything was sort of being constrained by state government.” The foundation raises money to pay for state economic development activities, including events to bring businesspeople to West Virginia and trips to take state business leaders abroad to promote the Mountain State. “The whole name, Discover the Real West Virginia, was meant to slap down some of the potential stereotypes that we felt like might be out there about West Virginia,” Bailey said. The group also was created to “go out there and tell the real truths about the state and our work force.”

Now, Toyota executives equate Buffalo, W.V. with the most efficient engine assembly plant in North America. Rockefeller led 33 West Virginians to Japan and Taiwan on the foundation’s first overseas trade mission in 1995. The delegation of business leaders met with Asian companies to discuss ways to sell their products on an international market. Many of the trip’s participants returned to West Virginia with contracts. The foundation has sponsored three other trade missions to Asia since that first trip in 1995. Past trips have linked West Virginian businesspeople with potential clients. This trip is different. The Mountain State delegation is thanking companies who have invested in West Virginia and is promoting the state to those who might be interested in opening a U.S. facility.

Nineteen Japanese companies have invested \$2 billion in the past decade in West Virginia, Bailey said. The companies have created more than 15,000 jobs, counting direct and residual positions. “Is that important? You bet it is,” he said. The West Virginia Development Office sponsors about seven trade missions a year; said its director, Steve Spence, in a pre-trip interview. Groups of business leaders and development officials have traveled to six continents to search for international investments. There is a mining-equipment trip to Beijing in September to match West Virginian and Chinese businesses. Employees in the development office’s Japan and Germany offices play a big role in coordinating the overseas events, he said.

The development staff’s trade mission location picks are based on the state’s largest industries: chemicals, polymers, wood products, mining equipment and overall manufacturing, Spence said. “We look at what we have available and figure out trips and look at market statistics,” he said. The agency always scopes out emerging markets and tries to take one or two trips to some of the more challenging markets, such as Vietnam, Peru, Brazil and Russia. Spence said he thought the past trade trips have been very successful. He rattled off several names of Japanese companies that now have facilities in West Virginia. “I don’t think many of these companies would be here had we not had

governors and the senator go to Japan,” he said. *To contact staff writer Jennifer Ginsberg, use e-mail or call 348-5195.*