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Foreign executives' state visit yields opportunities

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Some West Virginia wood will travel to Finland to undergo a thermal-treating testing process, all because a French businessman made a connection in West Virginia while learning about the state's wood products industry.

"That could be an open door for your red oak to be thermally treated in Finland," said Patrick Poirer, the manager of BRD, a company that specializes in planning and wood manufacturing for packing, decking and cladding.

Poirer was one of 15 French businesspeople, along with one Japanese businessman, who traveled around the state for five days, meeting economic development, government and wood products industry officials. The trip ended Tuesday.

Participants said they better understand how the state's wood industry operates. Wood products manufacturing is West Virginia's third-largest manufacturing industry, behind chemical and primary metal manufacturing.

There are three or four business opportunities that involve sharing technology and trade to follow up on, said Jean-Pierre Schwartz of the Washington Trade and Investment Group, an investment banking and consulting group that has ties to France's Vosges region. Poirer also talked with flooring company officials about exporting West Virginia products to France. BRD doesn't have any U.S. facilities, so Poirer wanted to find a company here that would import the chemical-free technology his business uses to treat wood in Finland.

He met people from the Wood Technology Center in Elkins, who might help him link up with a West Virginia company. "We have similarities between the territories; working in fiber, wood and textiles. That could be a good opportunity for your wood center and our wood center to work together in the future," Poirer said.

The Elkins center offers training and a technical support facility. The Vosges region has a similar center.

Both West Virginia and the Vosges region are fairly rural and full of people who are very proud of their companies, Poirer said. He noted that the facilities the group visited were very large and clean and the workers were very efficient. West Virginia Democratic Sen. Jay Rockefeller's Discover the REAL West Virginia Foundation, the West Virginia Development Office, U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Services and the Hardwood Alliance Zone sponsored the trip.

Rockefeller met up with the group in Elkins on Monday. "Selling companies on West

Virginia is a job made much easier by the quality of our work force. West Virginia workers are extremely loyal, hard-working and productive,” he told the group. “As Toyota and many others have discovered, our work force is one of the best in the world.”

Yuki Tsuneda, U.S. manager of the Japanese company Ando Sangyo Co. Ltd., said the trip was a good chance to see how West Virginia wood products were made, and the people who make them. He is currently researching housing companies and products in the hopes of eventually buying wood products from West Virginia and exporting them to Japan.

The contacts he made on the trip may lead to future business partnerships.