

Logan Banner

“Foreign delegates examine local wood industry”

By J.D. CHARLES, Staff Writer

A delegation of businessmen from France and Japan visited southern West Virginia this week on a four-day fact finding tour to learn more about how the Mountain State is open for business.

The group learned about the West Virginia wood and timber industry from a handful of experts from the industrial and environmental fields. The group arrived on Thursday at the Charleston-Yeager Airport where they were met by Sara Dearing of the Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation; Angela Mascia, West Virginia Development Office; Brandy Messer, Office of Senator Rockefeller and Ed Ryan of the Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation. On Friday, they left the Embassy Suites Hotel and arrived at the Earl Ray Tomblin Conference Center.

Jan Wiedenbeck, Project Leader for the Utilization Research Group, USDA Forest Service welcomed the delegation and gave a brief overview of the region and its history. She discussed forest products and marketing research. "In West Virginia we have a state university that is active in marketing our state," she said of WVU.

Brian Helmick, Deputy Secretary, West Virginia Department of Commerce, spoke about the business environment in the state and how it has changed to welcome new industry. Helmick said the Department of Commerce is new and it was created to emphasize economic growth and cooperation. The forest industry is a very important part of the state's economic engine, Helmick said.

"There are 12 major acres of forested land in West Virginia," he said. 80 percent of all property in West Virginia is considered timberland. The wood related industries constitute 32,000 jobs in our state. We are located in the center of the Appalachian forestland. With only 1.8 million citizens we have over 180 sawmills and wood related industries."

Bruce Hardwood is probably the largest hardwood plant in the world and it is located in West Virginia, as is American Woodmark, a cabinet manufacturing company. "We believe the number of companies we have in our state says something about the quality of our workers and our wood. Many investments have been made in West Virginia including Toyotas new \$1 billion engine facility and several French companies," Helmick said. Helmick also said he has been working with the W.Va. Tax Commissioner's office to create new legislation which provides tax incentives for large and small businesses to promote and encourage greater investment in the Mountain State. "We believe West Virginia has tremendous opportunities to offer the business investors," Helmick said. Ed Murriner, Assistant State Forester, W.Va. Division of Forestry discussed the Ginseng legislation he worked on and the nature of West Virginia foliage and forestry. Murriner pointed out that at one time it was feared Ginseng was going to become an endangered

species but, thankfully, people planting seeds had protected it.

"Wild Ginseng is heavily regulated. Probably 95 percent of our Ginseng goes in export to China. Ginseng grows wild though the state and growers have supplemented it by planting seeds through the forest. When grown, it is identical to wild Ginseng. It is impossible to tell the difference. It is probably worth \$1-3 million to the state in a year. We have 200 growers in the state and there are 10,000 diggers of wild Ginseng. This law, I think, helps promote the growing of it and may prevent it from being declared endangered."

Murriner also gave an overview of the timber industry in the state, pointing out there are:

- 260,000 private landowners
 - 6,769, 600 acres of land
 - 1,200 loggers
 - 250,000 acres of harvested land a year, all of which produces
 - 1 billion board feet of wood product harvested annually.
 - 161 commercial sawmills in the state have a production capacity of 900 million board feet annually and employ 3,500 people
 - 56 different lumber drying operations are in the state
- with a capacity of treating 70 percent of the green lumber produced. Products included oriented strand board; Microllam; Parallam; plywood and there are secondary wood product manufacturers producing flooring, cabinets, furniture, treated wood and specialty products. Murriner said most land in the state is owned by individuals and some companies.

"Not all of this wood is used in the state. We import some and export some," he said, adding that some logging outfits are so small they consist of one man and a horse, while others are major industrial operations.

Probably the largest sawmill in the state is Allegheny Wood Products located at Kingwood. It produces 40 million board feet a year with 200 employees. Most of the kilns in the state are located at or near a sawmill or processing plant. Murriner answered many questions from the French, most of which concerned environmental regulations and governmental standards. He said Copper Chromium Arsenate is no longer allowed to be used in the USA.

Three experts also spoke with the group: Dr. Bill Luppold, Rob Parsons and Dr. Al Schuler. The group then visited the James H. "Buck" Harless Wood Products Industrial Park where they met with Mike Whitt, executive director of the Mingo County Redevelopment Authority; Buck Harless, president of International Industries; Terry Sammons, chairman of the MCRA Board of Directors; Rowdy Male, Columbia Flooring Holden Plant Manager; Bill Jones, corporate engineer for Columbia Flooring and Senator H. Truman Chafin, West Virginia Senate.

On Saturday, the group was scheduled to visit Trus-Joist Corporation in Buckhannon to tour that facility and MeadWestvaco Natural Resource Center in Morgantown. Today, the group will visit Armstrong Wood Products (Bruce Flooring) in Beverly and the Wood

Technology Center in Elkins. The Wood Products Mission is being sponsored by the Discover the REAL West Virginia Foundation, the West Virginia Development Office, USDA Forest Services, and the Hardwood Alliance Zone. Jean Pierre Schwartz, founder of the Washington Trade & Investment Group, first came into Senator Rockefeller's Washington office

several years ago to meet about the possibility of bringing several French wood products companies to tour West Virginia, Interest from France grew and resulted in the 15 people this week. The group includes representatives of nine French wood companies and organizations and one Japanese company. Over the course of their six day visit, they will be traveling all over the State meeting with economic development officials, representatives from Wood Products companies in West Virginia, state and local officials, and representatives from the Hardwood Alliance Zone. Most in the group speak very little English so professional interpreter Dominique Barbier of Direct French Translation worked with them throughout the mission.

Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) will be joining the group on Monday at the Wood Technology Center in Elkins. He will be introduced by Jennifer Giovanatti, executive director of the Wood Technology Center.

Jean-Pierre Schwartz, who will be representing WTIG at the mission, is an engineer and investment banker with over 25 years of international experience. He founded WTIG in 1986 to provide investment banking, project finance, and general consulting services to both public and private sector clients.