

Inter Mountain News
Beckley, WV

Wood Tech Center Hosts French Officials

By WAYNE SHEETS
Staff Business Writer

U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., hoping foreign wood companies will invest in West Virginia, met Monday with a delegation of 15 representatives from nine French wood companies and a sales representative from a Japanese home building company at the West Virginia Wood Technology Center in Elkins. The delegation is on its fourth day of a six-day statewide tour of West Virginia's wood products industry.

The delegation is from Vosges in the east-central region of France, an area similar to much of West Virginia. It is a major source of the wood industries of Western Europe with abundant natural resources that support a thriving paper and timber industry.

The Wood Products Mission is sponsored by Discover the REAL West Virginia Foundation, West Virginia Development Office, USDA Forest Service and Hardwood Alliance Zone.

The mission was a long time coming, according to Jean-Pierre Schwartz, founder of the Washington Trade & Investment Group, who first contacted Rockefeller's office more than three years ago. Initially there were only a few companies involved, but interest from France grew. The group heard about West Virginia's strong wood industry and wanted to see first-hand what the state has to offer in terms of products, technology and technical solutions.

According to a written statement presented by Schwartz, the mission attendees, who are primarily in the residential home building supplies industry, specifically requested opportunities to network and meet with West Virginia's wood industry executives in hopes of finding new business ventures and partnerships. This could result in anything from the French purchasing wood products to the French companies being able to supply a product or technology for local wood companies.

The trade delegation was welcomed to Randolph County by Randolph County Development Authority Executive Director Jennifer Giovannitti. After brief remarks, Giovannitti explained the WTC's mission in the state's wood industry. "The tech center's centerpiece is its training," she said. "We have trained technicians in 35 of West Virginia's 55 counties, 14 states, Canada and Germany."

She also explained to the delegation how the WTC plays a key role in the wood industry of the local area, the state and the nation through its training and promotion activities, and through its association with the Hardwood Alliance Zone. "One of our most prized programs is the wood grading school here at the WTC," she said. "There are only two like it in the United States. One here and the other in Memphis, Tenn. Wood grading is a very complicated procedure with standards set by the National Hardwood Association and we have the staff to teach this very difficult discipline."

Wood industry specialist Dewey Ponthieu of the Hardwood Alliance Zone explained how HAZ came into being, its mission and how it operates. In his PowerPoint presentation, he showed that HAZ is centrally located to major population centers of the eastern United States and explained the dominance of the wood industry in the area and state's economy. In Rockefeller's address he said, "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. As Toyota (plant in Buffalo) and many others have discovered, our work force is one of the best in the world. I ask you to make a serious, responsible analysis of West Virginia and our wood products, and how this state may become a part of supplying products to you and your country.

"We are a patient people when it comes to our becoming a part of the world economy. We are willing to invest the time, just as long as it happens. We are also very honest with our potential foreign partners, but we are also aggressive in getting them to partner with us. We're at your service," he said.

The Japanese company Ando Sangyo produces environmentally friendly housing construction materials. According to a company statement, it is trying to commercialize hardwood floors, retaining walls and window sashes made of thinned cedar. It has also developed a product called "FORMPACKEN" which absorbs formaldehyde present in homes and turns it into a harmless substance. Formaldehyde in homes is one of the major causes of "sick house syndrome." One sales representative, Yuki Tsuneda, is employed in the sales office in Charleston. The company hopes to eventually establish a factory in West Virginia.

The group also toured Weyerhaeuser Trus Joist in Buckhannon on Saturday as part of the state's wood products mission. They were impressed by the facility's efficiency and cleanliness, Upshur County Development.