



World of opportunity

'Manufacturing czar' says free-trade agreement could open new markets for Jackson manufacturers

September 11, 2007

By Chris Gautz,

There are more than 100 businesses in Jackson County that export their goods around the world.

Monday, the federal government's so-called "manufacturing czar" discussed further opportunities that could result from free-trade agreements pending in Congress.

If approved, they would open new markets in Peru, Columbia, Panama and South Korea, according to William "Woody" Sutton, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Assistant Secretary for Manufacturing and Services.

"Our stuff is available and wanted by more customers," he said.

About a dozen business leaders and economic development officials attended his speech at The Enterprise Group, including Scott Pautuk, export manager for Dawn Food Products.

He said his company ships bakery supplies and other products to countries around the world, and is one of the biggest exporters in Jackson County.

Pautuk had specific questions for Sutton on product compliance in South Korea and the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

He said he appreciated being able to raise his concerns on topics of interest, and to learn more about all of the assistance that Sutton's office and the local U.S. Export Assistance Center can lend.

"It was helpful," he said.

While globalization often carries a negative connotation in Jackson - where factories have closed and jobs have been outsourced - the flip side is the positive impact on the export business.

More people earning better wages overseas can equate to a whole new batch of customers with the income to spend on American-made products.

Bill Rayl, executive director of the Jackson Area Manufacturers Association, said he doesn't think most people realize the amount of exporting that goes on in Jackson.

"We have companies exporting products around the world. Dawn is a huge exporter," he said. "It's one of those well-kept secrets."

Joseph Kramer, director of the Ypsilanti U.S. Export Assistance Center, said many Jackson County businesses send their products overseas.

Kramer's office helps businesses in six area counties, including Jackson, with a multitude of needs related to exports. This includes learning how to export and adding customers from more countries.

"I'm the access point to the resources in the federal government," he said.

Sutton has been on the job for less than a month and Monday was his first trip out of his office in Washington, D.C., which made Rayl proud.

"Jackson was on his must-stop list," Rayl said.

Sutton said he chose to come to Jackson because of the close working relationship with the Enterprise Group and Kramer's office.

"It was a great opportunity," he said.

Sutton was appointed to his post as the nation's "manufacturing czar" in May by President Bush and approved last month by the Senate.

Prior to this appointment, he served for more than five years as president of the Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Institute. He also had a 30-year career in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a rear admiral.

But the title of czar will likely never grow on him, he said. In fact, he said he dislikes the term.

"They shoot czars," he said with a smile.