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Asian trade mission aims to strengthen commercial ties

Executives, O'Malley plan 10-day trip to China, Korea, Vietnam in May

by Lindsey Robbins | Staff Writer

Drew Greenblatt has been able to sell his Baltimore company's steel products in some 30 countries, including China, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan, but he still hasn't been able to crack the Korean market.

He hopes next month's Asian trade mission involving as many as two dozen Maryland companies and state officials helps provide that opportunity.

"We're hoping this will open up some doors," said Greenblatt, president of Marlin Steel Wire Products. "We're excited about this. Otherwise, it would be challenging to have access to these high executives."

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) announced the mission April 21 during the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Seoul, South Korea. The agreement establishes a cooperative trade and investment relationship between the state and Seoul in science and technology, particularly life sciences. O'Malley and the accompanying business executives plan to visit China, Korea and Vietnam during the 10-day mission.

"I can truly say that China is working hard to create stronger trade relations with American businesses," Pam Klahr, president and CEO of the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, said in an email to The Gazette. Klahr said she recently returned from a visit to China with a national group of chamber executives.

"Building trust and understanding is the biggest hurdle," Klahr said. "I believe the trade missions are a good way to develop stronger working relationships."

Another chamber official, Georgette "Gigi" Godwin, CEO of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

"Maryland needs to be proactive in attracting good jobs and companies that will build our economy and our tax base," Godwin said. "Economic development is a competitive sport. To be competitive, Maryland must be active in emerging markets."

China is Maryland's third-largest export market, with more than \$571 million in exports in 2010. Korea is the sixth largest, jumping to \$481 million in 2010 from \$206 million in 2009. Vietnam is a more nascent export market, ranking No. 52, but state officials view it as a promising opportunity.

The state already has meetings set up with several prospective companies in Asia and hopes to return with deal announcements, said Karen Glenn Hood, spokeswoman for the Department of Business and Economic Development.

"With economists predicting that Asia could have 50 percent of global [gross domestic product] by 2050, it is critical that we move forward now to explore new opportunities for trade and investment, particularly in our shared strengths on science and technology," O'Malley said in a statement.

Maryland's last state-sponsored trade mission in 2008 yielded three Israeli companies that set up operations in the state.

"A large part of the trip is helping the businesses here open new doors in Asia. ... It's the personal visit that can really seal that deal," Hood said, and O'Malley's presence will highlight for foreign executives the importance of the mission.

"These missions are really very successful," Hood said. "We just haven't done as many recently because we want to be mindful of the budget."

State officials are still selecting the 24 businesses that will be represented on the mission. Among those that have already signed on is Marlin Steel, which produces wire container baskets used to store components within an assembly line.

Marlin started exporting three years ago, and about one-quarter of Marlin's 30 employees owe their jobs to Marlin's global clients, Greenblatt said.

But the company has had trouble breaking into the Korean market and hopes to forge better relationships through face-to-face connections, he said. Despite selling baskets to almost every other Asian vehicle company, Marlin has not managed to reach Hyundai or Kia, he said, attributing the difficulties to Korea's preference for domestic companies.

This will be Marlin's first trade mission.

The mission's delegation also will include state business officials and academic leaders. In China, O'Malley is to address the 13th Shanghai Bio-Forum, a gathering that attracts that nation's top biopharmaceutical executives. The delegation also is to attend a "Maryland in China" banquet to discuss trade and investment opportunities in Maryland for Chinese companies.

Since 2007, Maryland has attracted more than 20 foreign-owned companies from high-growth countries and has trade offices in 10 countries, according to DBED information. Maryland was the first state to open a Chinese trade office, in 1996.

Among its foreign success stories are Ireland's Ellickson Software in Baltimore city and Korean drug supplier Daewoong Pharmaceutical in Rockville.

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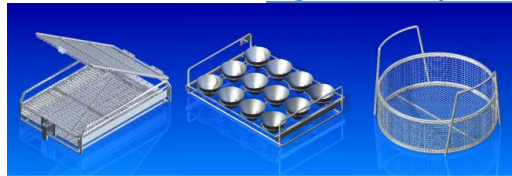
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