

Speakers at desert conference call for easing trade barriers

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Easing trade barriers with smaller nations could help U.S. business stung by the souring economy or harm it even more by opening more opportunities for outsourcing, said participants at a national trade conference taking place this week in Palm Springs. Keeping the country's financial state from falling further by doing away with trade barriers was among numerous topics aimed at hundreds of exporters and the businesses that work with them, gathered at the Wyndham Palm Springs for the second day of the National District Export Council conference.

For the first time, the California Inland Empire District Export Council, organized and hosted the annual event.

The group, established by the U.S. Department of Commerce, aims to educate small- and medium-size businesses on export opportunities.

The global toll the credit crisis had taken could diminish the amount of goods other countries will be willing to buy from the U.S., said Robert E. Scott, a senior international economist with the Economic Policy Institute who later likened support of foreign trade agreements espoused by government officials to "Kool-Aid" fed to the public.

"These deals are not working," Scott told a filled ballroom Thursday.

Instead, trade agreements should be focused on richer countries, he said.

Doug Goudie, director of international trade policy for the National Association of Manufacturers, said the country remained behind the momentum of the rest of the world and the three trade agreements would help spur exporting.

"We need to be exporting like the manufacturing country we are," Goudie said.

Later, Israel Hernandez, assistant secretary for trade promotion and director general of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service, defended the three trade proposals.

"Openness is vital and must be defended by leaders of both parties," he told a luncheon crowd.

Caroline Beteta, chief executive officer of the \$50 million private-public California Travel and Tourism Commission, literally compared tourists and oranges -- a crate of 6,600 of them being equal in value to a busload of Japanese tourists.

Beteta said strict security measures, or the perception that long delays and searches await foreign travelers arriving at U.S. airports remains a challenge as does Visa requirements limiting South Korean visits.

If a Visa waiver were granted for the country, Beteta said California's tourism revenue would double or triple overnight.

For Paulson Manufacturing Group, a family-owned company in Temecula since 1947, a recent trip to Colombia turned into a \$300,000 contract for the company's electrical safety equipment.

The company's president, Roy Paulson, said he began focusing on exporting four years ago to quell the ebb and flow in domestic business as a result of the U.S. economy.

"I could keep our business at a steadier pace," he said.

Now international work accounts for 20 percent of the company's business.

Paulson, an organizer of the exporting event and a proponent of free trade, said countries that import U.S. goods with tariffs involved need a compelling reason to import them. In his case, the Colombian company couldn't find Paulson's technology anywhere else.
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