



# VIEWS & VISIONS

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## Export Assistance Provides Bridge to International Sales

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Leslie Wrenn Drake is Director of the U.S. Export Assistance Center for the U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration. She directs the U.S. Export Assistance Centers in West Virginia, with locations in Charleston and Wheeling.

Before joining the U.S. Commercial Service as an international trade specialist in 2006, Ms. Drake worked for the West Virginia Development Office International Division for 13 years, working with West Virginia businesses to help them access export markets.

In the past 20 years, Ms. Drake has led or organized trade missions to 25 countries, assisting many small- and medium-sized companies.

She received her master of business administration degree in international business and marketing from the University of Kentucky, and she is a certified global business provider.

West Virginia's U.S. Export Assistance Centers (USEACs), located in Charleston and Wheeling, work to help companies launch or increase sales in global markets. During the past two years, the centers have counseled and provided other services to about 300 West Virginia businesses, most of them small- or medium-sized employers. This generated nearly \$40 million of new international business in 39 countries.

The USEACs' international trade specialists visit clients in every corner of the state, across all industries, taking the time to learn about the products and services, understanding the needs and knowledge gaps and helping to offer solutions for achieving more international sales. A team exists in West Virginia with extensive trade knowledge on market selection, trade financing, shipping and freight forwarding options and U.S. trade regulations.

Many U.S. companies reactively sell products internationally as a result of trade show connections or Internet contact, yet neglect to devise a proactive plan to focus sales strategy in the best markets possible. How do small- and medium-sized business owners get these answers, while also wearing each of the hats required to keep the company profitable in the domestic market?

It is not difficult to begin selling products – the biggest issue is to understand the commitment. The USEACs, West Virginia District Export Council and West Virginia Development Office, as well as other partners, have made tremendous efforts in educating potential manufacturers on the issues and concerns, in addition to providing answers to the questions and solutions in order to mitigate risk.

In addition to trade counseling, the centers help local companies connect with international customers through market research, business

matchmaking and commercial diplomacy. It also helps connect businesses to a network of international companies located in West Virginia.

Exporting opportunities abound through planned trade missions during which a West Virginia company travels abroad to meet with pre-screened and qualified potential partners. Excellent regional and local trade education seminars address specific trade issues and opportunities. Export-ready companies are scheduled during individualized one-on-one meetings with potential agents and partners in the target country – complete with interpreters, drivers and a pre-planned schedule.

Reasons to make exporting a priority include:

- Companies develop a larger customer base while lowering their risk. More than 70 percent of the world's purchasing power lies beyond America's borders.
- Exports help to smooth out U.S. economic downturns. Whether it's strength of currency or overall economic growth, a downturn in the U.S. economy can be offset by strength in the economies of our trading partners.
- A U.S. company that exports is 40 percent more profitable than those that don't engage in international sales.

A variety of services are available to assist West Virginia businesses in expanding into global markets, including:

- free consultation to determine a company's export readiness;
- connections to affordable export working capital, credit receivable insurance and other export-related financing providers;
- free assistance in identifying foreign markets for an exporter's product or service;
- help with completing export sale documents, certificates of origin, and compliance with free trade agreements;

- education on export licensing requirements that might be applicable to an export sale;
- access to a network of international trade specialists in U.S. embassies and consulates in more than 80 countries worldwide;
- due diligence, background checks on potential partners, business matchmaking and custom promotion events with high-level U.S. and foreign government officials in the target country;
- trade advocacy services for a level playing field for bidding on foreign contracts; and
- inexpensive trade missions and subsidized costs for advertising and exhibiting in international trade shows in dynamic markets.

The largest manufactured product export category is plastics, accounting for \$1 billion of West Virginia's total merchandise exports in 2013. Other top merchandise exports are machinery, vehicles, chemicals, medical devices, aerospace components, automotive components, aluminum, wood products, rubber and electrical machinery. Coal

exports accounted for \$8.63 billion in 2013, ranking West Virginia as the number one supplier to international markets.

From a larger economic perspective, favorable U.S. dollar global exchange rates are a big factor, as well as free trade agreements (FTAs). Countries with FTAs, such as Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Israel, Jordan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Oman, Panama, Peru and Singapore, are great places to start. In general, FTA markets have fewer barriers to trade, such as strict labeling requirements and complicated import licenses, and they have more analogous legal systems and accountability mechanisms of which U.S. businesses are accustomed.

Top countries for West Virginia's products include:

- Canada (\$1.8 billion)
- The Netherlands (\$665 million)
- China (\$613 million)
- Brazil (\$513 million)

- Italy (\$469 million)
- United Kingdom (\$449 million)
- France (\$394 million)
- Turkey (\$329 million)
- Mexico (\$324 million)
- India (\$314 million)

However, smaller markets are also prosperous. For example, exports to Colombia are up by 38 percent and Malaysia by 107 percent. Exports to the United Arab Emirates grew an astonishing 443 percent in 2013.

West Virginia businesses have high-quality, U.S.-made products in demand around the world. Perceived and real barriers to trade can be understood and eliminated with the assistance of the network of export professionals in the state. ▽

To take advantage of the export assistance offered in West Virginia, a company can visit [www.export.gov/westvirginia](http://www.export.gov/westvirginia) and contact the U.S. Export Assistance Centers to begin the journey or get help along the way.



*Senior Commercial Officer Brian Brisson, center, counseled clients on business opportunities during a business-to-senior-commercial-officer meeting at the Trade Winds program held in Colombia in May 2014.*