

# ON DEC

## THE ANNUAL DEC CONFERENCE RESULTS IN EXCHANGE OF GOOD IDEAS

by Cory Churches  
Export America

This year the U.S. Department of Commerce hosted the annual conference of the District Export Councils, or DEC. Held in Washington, D.C., the event spanned three days in early June. Delegates met with senior government officials, as well as one another, to discuss best practices and trade and legislative issues.

“Having the meeting in Washington gave us access to the people doing the daily business,” says Margaret Gatti, chairperson of the Mid-Atlantic DEC. “The briefing from Peter Davidson, general council of the U.S. Trade Representative, was very informative. I was able to ask a burning question regarding the treatment of rules of origin and how that would be handled in the proliferation of trade agreements. Currently, the NAFTA rules of origin are so complex that some companies don’t take advantage of the benefits.”

Appointed by successive secretaries of commerce, DECs are organizations comprised of volunteer leaders from local business communities, whose knowledge of international business provides a collective source of professional advice for firms in their regions. For more than 25 years, DECs have assisted local companies to export, thereby promoting our collective economic growth, employment, and business stability.

Closely affiliated with the U.S. Export Assistance Centers, the 58 DECs combine the expertise of more than 1,500 exporters, as well as private and public export service providers throughout the United States.

### PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Commerce Secretary Don Evans welcomed the DEC members and recognized their important role in providing export assistance. He cited their sponsorship of trade promotion events and seminars for local businesses as two notable examples of service to local exporters. He discussed the increasingly global world fostered by free trade, the Internet, and the rapid sharing of commercial information. He then took

a moment to recognize the 17 small and medium-sized companies and organizations that received the President’s “E” Award for Excellence in Exporting. Evans also emphasized the impact that local companies have in promoting America’s economic growth and prosperity.

### NATIONAL EXPORT STRATEGY

Grant Aldonas, undersecretary for international trade, discussed the latest *National Export Strategy*, released by the Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee (TPCC). This year marks the reinvigoration of the TPCC, a group of more than a dozen U.S. government agencies and departments, chaired by the secretary of commerce.



Grant Aldonas discusses this year’s National Export Strategy with DEC members during lunch. He emphasized the focus on improved customer service and export opportunities.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Commerce

The 2002 *National Export Strategy* presents 60 recommendations with an overall goal to ensure that all U.S. companies interested in exporting can join the global economy. Key recommendations include improving customer service and the aggressive pursuit of new export opportunities for U.S. firms. Another significant component of the report is a survey of 3,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The survey found that 30 percent of U.S. SMEs that do not currently export have an interest in doing so, and of those that do export, two-thirds export to only one market.

### REINVIGORATING THE DEC

Maria Cino, director-general of the Commercial Service, challenged the DEC members to establish performance-based strategic plans that focus on mentoring, trade promotion, and building awareness of the programs and efforts of the local U.S. Export Assistance Centers. Cino encouraged DEC members to work to prevent the Commercial Service from being the “best-kept secret” in government.

Members, like Madeline Grant, take their role as DEC members seriously. Grant says, “Having been an intern at Commerce, client of Commerce, and now DEC member for quite some time, one of the most rewarding parts of the volunteer process is mentoring Commerce clients who are launching their export programs. When these new-to-export companies have an opportunity to meet with someone who is actually doing ‘it’ (exporting, that is) they often walk away with the confidence to take the plunge. We may have solved a nitty-gritty problem that had become a major road block, instilled confidence, or negotiated a major contract—either way, the new-to-export company can say ‘if they can do it, so can I.’”

### COMING TOGETHER TO SWAP IDEAS

During the conference, there were several opportunities for members to hear



A panel representing the majority and minority staffs of congressional subcommittees participates in a discussion of trade issues with DEC members.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Commerce

from one another about programs, outreach efforts, and initiatives that could be used in other locals. For example, the Indiana DEC presented its methodology for revitalization that will enable the DEC to meet its strategic goals. Steps include screening membership against a point system; creating a position description; designating ex-officio members; surveying members and providing them opportunities for active involvement; and empowering regional chairs. The DEC has also developed ways to measure its success.

The New Jersey DEC is working with local universities to conduct an “export user needs survey” that will assist the DEC develop programs, instructional aids and incentives to promote local exports. The survey asks successful exporters about their experiences and recommendations. Results will be shared with local export promotion groups as well.

The West Virginia DEC created a highly successful e-newsletter to communicate export activities and issues to local exporters, media, state leaders, overseas posts, government agencies, congressional representatives, and other DEC members. The e-newsletter is a fundamental way for the DEC to fulfill its mission.

On the first full day of the conference, members spent the morning hearing from congressional staff members on

issues ranging from trade promotion authority to appropriations for trade programs. Later the same day, during one of several roundtable sessions, members discussed major regulatory changes instituted as a result of last September’s terrorist attacks.

“It’s great to hear from the upper management of the Department of Commerce regarding the changes taking place to provide better outreach and support for smaller exporting companies,” says Mark Matsumoto of Network International, former chairman of the Southern California DEC and long-time client of the International Trade Administration. “Each DEC is doing creative and innovative things in their communities, and it’s refreshing to come together to share new ideas.”

This year’s conference effectively brought together trade policy leaders and industry participants to discuss liberalizing global markets, reinvigorating the DEC members, and promoting the value of the Commercial Service to a larger audience.

The San Diego District Export Council will host the 2003 National Conference in September. ■

Interested in taking advantage of DEC services? Contact your local Export Assistance Center, a list of which is on the back cover of the magazine.