

NATO lawmakers get briefing on UA projects

BY TRACIE DUNGAN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

FAYETTEVILLE — University of Arkansas researchers told 15 members of the parliaments of 10 European nations Monday how they're working on projects ranging from improved dental implants to helping NASA land on Venus.

But faculty at the Fayetteville campus were also quick to say there is more to Arkansas than the wealth and growth the visitors saw touring the state's northwest corner Monday.

Make no mistake about it, they said: Arkansas has hidden pockets of poverty and can't look to its declining manufacturing base for the job growth it needs.

That's the kind of thing you miss "if you ride around with the mayors and they just show you the big houses," said Jeff Collins, director of UA's Center for Business and Economic Research.

Many of the visitors belong to NATO's Parliamentary Assembly, an inter-parliamentary organization of legislators from the 26 member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its 22 associate countries.

The visitors belong to the group's Economics and Security Committee as well as its subcommittees on Transatlantic Economic Relations and East-West Economic Cooperation and Convergence. Richard Hudson, UA's vice chancellor for governmental and community relations, counted 15 members from 10 countries that included France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Some wore headsets because they had translators in tow, and the low buzz of their interpreting could be heard as university officials spoke of their research.

Congressman John Boozman, R-Ark., a member of the group, welcomed his colleagues to Northwest Arkansas on Monday for what will be a three-day stay before the group travels to San Francisco for the final stop of its U.S. visit.

It was a chance for the NATO visitors to get an up-close look at international trade's impact on a regional economy in the United States and to talk to civic, business and education leaders, said Boozman aide Stacey McClure. She added that members decided they wanted to take a look at rural America for a change.

"I'm not sure you can call this rural America," said Peter Bottomley, a member of the British Parliament, after touring Space Photonics' lab at UA's Engineering Research Center and some of UA's Genesis Technology Incubator companies. "There's more to the United States than the East and West coasts."

The visitors, who had met with area mayors and business leaders earlier in the day, saw how dynamic America's private sector and government leadership is, he said. "If you're going to be in partnership with people it helps to understand them," Bottomley said.

At Arkansas Power Electronics International, the visitors heard design engineer Sharmila Mounce and employee Brice McPherson explain some of the company's current research and development projects.

For instance, the company's work with silicon carbide as a semiconductor material with uses such as sensors, includes a project helping the National Aeronautics and Space Administration create a Venus lander capable of functioning in the planet's hostile environment.

The company has worked to shrink the semiconductor material.

The compact size allows the electronic component to handle Venus' extreme heat conditions, which reach the 900-degree Fahrenheit range, he said.

Venus' atmosphere is actually acidic, McPherson said, and the silicon carbide can handle sulfuric acid, too.

Boozman's staff offered no specific outcomes that might result from the visit, aside from a general strengthening of ties between countries.

Patrick Berron, one of France's consul generals stationed in the United States, said one of his main duties is to promote economic and cultural ties between countries, which includes promoting French exports and helping France invest in the United States and create jobs.

While working in Houston, Berron said, he had heard about Northwest Arkansas' growth but hadn't seen the area up close.

"As a diplomat, you change countries every three or four years. And this is my latest assignment," he said.

"I knew a lot of things were happening here," Berron said. "It's an extremely positive impression."



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Legislators from several European countries listen to Chuck Chalfant (far right) of Space Photonics Inc. talk Monday about microelectronics produced for the U.S. Air Force at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's Research and Technology Park in Fayetteville. Members of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly are on a three-day tour of Northwest Arkansas.