

Obama Promotes Steps To Boost U.S. Trade

Ken Thomas, Associated Press

EVERETT, Wash. (AP) — President Barack Obama called Friday for more steps to help U.S. companies compete overseas, standing in front of an enormous Boeing Dreamliner to summon a bright future for American manufacturing and exports.

Visiting a Boeing plant in Washington state where he watched some of the massive 787s under assembly, Obama pushed for Congress to continue financing a national export credit agency crucial to a goal of doubling exports by 2014.

The president announced steps to offer financing to U.S. companies to match help their foreign competitors are getting from overseas to help reduce trade imbalances that favor other countries.

Addressing workers at the plant, Obama said: "You're the most productive on earth. You can compete with anybody. You will outwork anybody. As long as the playing field is level, you can compete with any worker, anywhere, anytime, in China, in Europe, it does not matter. If we have a level playing field, America will always win, because we have the best workers."

"I will not stand by when our competitors don't play by the rules," he said.

Obama delivered his remarks in front of a huge Dreamliner turbine after emerging from the back of the aircraft and walking down red-carpeted stairs to the tune of "Hail to the Chief" in a dramatic piece of White House staging. It came at the end of a three-day trip that included heavy fundraising along the West Coast and a stop at a Milwaukee padlock manufacturer.

Obama called on Congress to extend the Export-Import Bank's authorization. Congress already extended it through May of this year, but White House officials said the bank will reach its lending limit at the end of March. Obama pointed to the bank as a key player in helping promote U.S. exports.

At the same time, the White House announced that Boeing will participate in an Export-Import Bank program that helps companies advance money to suppliers on export-related contracts. Administration officials said Boeing would be committing to more than \$700 million in short-term credit this year. Officials said the arrangement would help Boeing compete for foreign clients against European jet maker Airbus.

Obama also said he was instructing the Export-Import Bank to help U.S. companies with financing to counter foreign companies that are getting unfair assistance from their governments.

Facing re-election, Obama has pointed to a decline in unemployment and touted a

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recent boost in manufacturing jobs as an indicator of an economy on the mend. Republicans seeking the White House have accused Obama of failing to steer the economy out of a deep recession, setting up the health of the nation's economy as a pivotal issue in the 2012 election.

The White House unveiled a number of steps aimed at boosting foreign trade, including:

—A pilot program called Global Credit Express to help small business exporters apply for up to a 1-year loan of up to \$500,000.

—A simplified process for foreign trade zones, which allow companies to use special procedures to delay or reduce duty payments on foreign merchandise.

—A website called BusinessUSA making it easier for companies to access information to help their businesses grow.

In addition to the trade announcement, Obama was holding two fundraisers in the Seattle area Friday, including a fundraising luncheon with 65 people at the Medina home of Jeff Brotman, the co-founder of retailer Costco. Tickets for the event cost \$17,900.

Obama also was appearing at a reception with 450 supporters in Bellevue, with a musical performance by the band The Head and the Heart. Tickets started at \$1,000. Both events were supporting the Obama Victory Fund, a joint fundraising committee of Obama's campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

Obama reported Friday that he had raised \$29.1 million for his campaign and the Democratic Party in January, putting him ahead of the pace he set in the last quarter of 2011. Obama had raised about \$250 million through the end of January.

Obama's visit to the Boeing plant comes a few months after the National Labor Relations Board dropped a high-profile lawsuit against the company over allegations it built a nonunion plant in South Carolina to retaliate against past union strikes in Washington state.

The board halted the case after the Machinists union approved a four-year contract extension with Boeing, which plans to build the new version of its 737 airplane in Washington state. Republican presidential candidates seized upon the case, accusing the NLRB of threatening a new Boeing factory in South Carolina.

White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters that Obama's visit would be focused on manufacturing and trade promotion and had "nothing to do with" the NLRB case.

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