Gov. Haley To Attend Trade Meeting In Japan

Seanna Adcox, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Gov. Nikki Haley and her husband are attending an international trade meeting in Japan next week as part of an effort to persuade companies to expand or locate in South Carolina, Commerce Secretary Bobby Hitt said Thursday.

Haley is among a 40-member delegation of state and local leaders traveling to Tokyo for the 35th annual meeting of the Japan-U.S. Southeast Association, held Sept. 13-15. However, meetings lined up by Commerce begin Monday, Hitt said.

Hitt said South Carolina stands to benefit from Japanese companies' desire to diversify following last year's earthquake-tsunami crisis, which shut down most of the country's nuclear reactors and left the country more reliant on imports to supply electricity.

"They're looking to have plants in multiple places because of the potential challenges in Japan," he said. "Now is the optimum time for us to be paying attention. We're excited about the potential for expansions and new projects."

About 500 people are expected to attend the joint meeting — the first since the March 2011 disaster — including the governors of four of the other six states participating.

A South Carolina governor has not attended since 2003, when former Gov. Mark Sanford traveled to Osaka, Japan. The meetings' location rotates between Japan and the Southeast. South Carolina last hosted the conference in 2002 in Charleston.

Deputy Commerce Secretary George Patrick Haley and two of the agency's project managers leave Saturday. Haley leaves Sunday with her husband, an aide and two security officers, Hitt said.

Michael Haley, a strategic planning officer in the Army National Guard, will pay his own way, said Rob Godfrey, the governor's spokesman.

"Like the governor, the first gentleman is focused on putting South Carolinians back to work and will have a full schedule of business development and recruitment meetings in Japan," Godfrey said.

Nearly 150 Japanese-based companies operate in South Carolina, employing 12,500 people. That includes Bridgestone Americas Inc., which last September announced plans to spend $1.2 billion and bring 850 jobs to Aiken County by building a new tire plant and expanding an existing facility.

Commerce officials have spent the past few months visiting the state's Japanese

companies to gauge their needs and interests. Meetings in Japan will involve 14 projects already in discussions, as well as more than a dozen other potentials, Hitt said.

Gov. Haley is scheduled to speak at the monthly luncheon Wednesday of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan. Hundreds of Japanese executives are expected to attend, said Clarke Thompson, Commerce's director of international trade.

"It's a huge opportunity for us to get some exposure," he said.

South Carolina had a Commerce office in Japan for several decades, but state budget cuts following the Great Recession prompted its closure. Japan is the state's second-largest source of economic development projects and foreign investment, behind Germany, according to Commerce.

Haley and Commerce officials traveled to London in July for an international airshow. Hitt has said South Carolina's relationship with aerospace giant Boeing Co. opened doors for the state there.

Haley was criticized for a similar trip to the Paris Air Show in June 2011, which critics called a taxpayer-funded junket and vacation. Michael Haley also went on that trip and reimbursed the state $1,440 several months later for his costs.

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