

Trade proponents make their case at Baton Rouge summit

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Trade advocates and business executives at a Baton Rouge trade summit today said they see an opportunity to move the needle toward more open U.S. trade policies, opening a door for Louisiana's booming natural gas industry.

Speaking in a Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center ballroom overlooking the Mississippi River, business leaders at the Future of Trade Summit pitched the intersection of globalization and local manufacturing as a boon for local economies like Baton Rouge and New Orleans, particularly as the energy pendulum swings toward natural gas, which has a large presence in Louisiana.

The World Trade Center of New Orleans hosted the event, which featured panels on trade and finance as well as a keynote speech from G2 LNG CEO Thomas Hudson.

The Trump administration, which has rankled global trade advocates with "America first" rhetoric, appears to be getting incrementally more willing to move toward traditional free trade policies, said Louisiana Economic Development Secretary Don Pierson.

"If you start to impact trade policies in a very negative way, you can start to cut into the manufacturing jobs that are very important to our economy," Pierson said.

Pierson noted his recent meeting with U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson left some uncertainty to the administration's direction on economic policy, but he said he expects opportunities for a more open trade agenda from Trump's circle.

Pierson and others noted that the billions in river commerce that flow through ports in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and elsewhere along the Mississippi hinge upon wonky-sounding trade pacts that have been in the crosshairs of the Trump administration over the past two years. Several local business and economic leaders have in recent months raised concern over the impact that ripping up trade pacts would have on Louisiana's economy.

And Gov. John Bel Edwards, who made an impromptu visit to the event after visiting the Louisiana Restaurant Association meeting next door, championed Louisiana's role in global trade policy, while calling for more investment in the state's network of ports.

"We're allowing this vacuum to stay out there that is going to be filled by China," Edwards said, adding, "We want our trade deals to be as fair as possible, but we cannot be afraid to go out and engage the world."

Kaitlin Sighinolfi, director of government affairs at the German firm Siemens and former staffer for former U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, called for a rallying of the industry to lobby more aggressively at the federal level on the issue, a sentiment echoed by others at the event.

"I think you have to play both offense and defense in a world like this," said Edward Hayes, partner with Leake & Andersson LLP.

That point comes as a new industry group called the Louisiana Energy Export Association begins lobbying on behalf of liquefied natural gas companies in the state. The group is spearheaded, along with WTCNO, by G2 LNG, whose CEO, Hudson, delivered the keynote speech at the event today.

"We have the gas, the world wants the gas. The challenge we have is how do we get it out of the U.S. and into the global markets," Hudson said.

—Sam Karlin