

# Tampa Bay Times

 WINNER OF 10 PULITZER PRIZES

## Tampa Bay leaders descend on Chile with a mission to expand exports



**Tony Marrero, Times Staff Writer**

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In a nondescript building in Pinellas Park, a homegrown company makes equipment so rugged and reliable, the U.S. Army is a regular customer.

Among the newer products from Custom Manufacturing and Engineering Inc., is a solar panel that produces 440 watts of electricity and folds into a case light enough to be hefted by two people.

"Open it up, hook it up and you're up and running in about 10 minutes," said company president Nancy Crews.

The family business of about 35 full-time employees doesn't do much exporting, but that could change soon.

This week, Crews will join a historic trade mission to Santiago, Chile, organized by the Tampa Bay Export Alliance. Representatives from 14 Tampa Bay area companies and organizations will sit down for prearranged meetings with potential buyers who are already interested in their goods and services.

The trip is the first since the alliance was formed earlier this year by top economic development officials in Pinellas and Hillsborough. Leading the mission are some big political names from both sides of the bay: Pinellas County Commission Chairwoman Karen Seel, Hillsborough Commissioner Les Miller, St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman and Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn.

Buckhorn said he believes it's the first time that the mayors of the bay area's two largest cities have gone together on a trade mission abroad.

"Symbolically and substantively, this is a huge step forward in the Pinellas-Hillsborough relationship," he said, "but more importantly, it recognizes that we compete together as a region and that the parochialism is a thing of the past."

While company representatives connect with potential trade partners, the delegates will meet with political counterparts and others to sell the region as a whole, said Tampa Hillsborough Economic Development Corp. CEO Rick Homans. The itinerary includes a meeting with the Chilean Trade Commission and Santiago Mayor Carolina Tohá Morales.

"We'll really be taking Santiago by storm for the three days that we'll be there," Homans said. "We'll be present, we'll be visible and we'll be making waves."

While the main goal is boosting exports, officials from Visit St. Pete/Clearwater and Visit Tampa Bay also are making the trip with hopes of capitalizing on Chile's new visa waiver program, which allows eligible citizens to travel to the United States for up to 90 days without a visa.

"What we hope we import are tourists," said Seel, who chairs her county's Tourist Development Council.

### Reaching for a goal

Chile's economy is consistently ranked as one of the most open and stable in Latin America and is already one of Florida's leading trade partners. That, local leaders say, makes the country a good place to start a boots-on-the-ground effort to improve a glaring statistic.

According to the Tampa Bay Partnership, exports in 2012 accounted for only 8 percent of the bay area's GRP, gross regional product, for the eight-county region surrounding Hillsborough and Pinellas. The national average is 12 percent of exports contributing to GRP. If the bay area were to reach that level of exports, it could inject up to \$8 billion into the Tampa Bay economy and potentially create up to 40,000 jobs.

"It's about leveraging the region's strengths, building relationships and, most important, seeing a measurable increase in export sales," said Stacey Swank, business development manager for Pinellas County Economic Development.

### Suitable matches

The ground work for the trip started months ago when businesses submitted applications to the U.S. Commercial Service, the trade promotion arm of the U.S. Department of Commerce. The agency looks for applicants that offer goods and services suitable for the market and helps match attendees with potential buyers in the host country.

Strong sectors in Chile include health care and medical equipment, telecommunications and renewable energy. Local businesses making this week's trip specialize in wastewater screening, custom stonework, electric motor repair, industrial sealant, marine supplies and emergency oxygen equipment, among other goods and services. Representatives from Eckerd College and the University of South Florida are also making the trip.

Kriseman said he worked to get Eckerd to attend to tout their marine science program and others that could attract Chilean students. He said he gladly accepted the invitation to serve as an ambassador for St. Petersburg businesses that could not attend but have something to offer to trade partners there.

"It's an opportunity for us to get in the game, so to speak, to attract business here and help educate that area on what we have to offer from a tourism standpoint," Kriseman said.

Crews said her company's solar panels could be attractive to Chile's booming mining industry. More orders could mean hiring more highly-skilled workers.

"We're so new at this we're just looking for a foothold in the marketplace and then go from there," she said. "We're really excited."

*Times staff writer Richard Danielson contributed to this report. Contact Tony Marrero at [tmarrero@tampabay.com](mailto:tmarrero@tampabay.com) or (727) 893-8779. Follow @tmarrerotimes.*

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### Who made the trip

Here are the 14 businesses and organizations attending the Tampa Bay trade mission to Chile:

Bell Performance Inc.

Chemical Containers Inc.

Custom Manufacturing and Engineering Inc.

Eckerd College

First Choice Marine Supply

Florida General Trading

Granex Inc.

Grinder Wear Parts

Hydro-Dyne Engineering Inc.

Monster Transmission and Performance

Pro-Tech Coatings Inc.

SOS Technologies

Tampa Armature Works Inc.

University of South Florida

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