BUSINESS

State's exports up in 2011

Vehicles, cotton yarn and fabric lead list as shipments grow to $25 billion

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South Carolina's exports grew 21.4 percent last year, with the largest increases seen in vehicles, cotton yarn and fabric, the state Department of Commerce said Tuesday.

Statewide exports totaled nearly $25 billion in goods sent to 198 countries 2011. In 2010, the total was more than $20 billion.

South Carolina currently ranks 14th in the nation for exports, but leads among states in exports of tires and vehicles.

Michelin North America, with headquarters in Greenville, exports tires to North American customers from its numerous plants in the state while Greer-based BMW Manufacturing Co., exports approximately 70 percent of its vehicles to dealers around the world.

Brian Reed, vice president/client services at CB Richard Ellis/The Furman Co., said demand is increasing for South Carolina manufactured goods.

Exports of vehicles grew 52 percent last year, while the shipping of cotton yarn and fabric grew at nearly 50 percent. South Carolina holds nearly 30 percent of the share of U.S. exported tires, the Department of Commerce said.

The state's largest merchandise export category is transportation equipment, which accounted for $8.3 billion in 2011, said the U.S. Chamber's International Trade Administration. Other top merchandise exports are machinery ($3.6 billion), chemicals ($2.9 billion), plastics and rubber products ($2.4 billion), and computers and electronic products ($1.4 billion), the ITA said.

"South Carolinians know how to make things — and we ship them the world over," Commerce Secretary Bobby Hitt said.

He said Germany and Canada remain very important trade partners for South Carolina, with purchases of $4 billion and $3.7 billion, respectively. China, which accounted for $3 billion in merchandise exports last year, is "increasingly becoming a strong market," Hitt said.

Reed said that with the growth rate of exports to China over the past five or six years, "it's very easy to envision a scenario in which China is the largest consumer of South Carolina manufactured goods by 2020."

"That's not exactly something that we typically perceive, China as a big purchaser of our manufactured goods," he said.

Jim Newsome, president and chief executive officer of the state's Ports Authority, said 'Growing our export base is essential to generating jobs in the maritime industry and across the state."

The ITA said export-supported jobs linked to manufacturing account for an estimated 7.6 percent of the state's total private-sector employment.

More than a quarter (28.5 percent) of all manufacturing workers in the state depend on exports for their jobs, the ITA said.

Exporters "benefit from access to competitive, deepwater port facilities," Newsome said.

"We will continue to work on improving and modernizing our ports system, which plays a key role in bringing companies" to the state, said Gov. Nikki Haley.