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Japanese, W.Va. entrepreneurs find common ground in growth challenges

By JOSEPHINE MENDEZ



Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch. Property manager Luke Huffman, left, gives a tour to rural revitalizers from U.S. and Japan at West Edge, Coalfield Development Corporation, Monday, Oct. 23, 2017 in Huntington.

HUNTINGTON - Even though their countries are several thousand miles apart, entrepreneurs from Huntington and Japan are coming together in the name of revitalization and resilience to find ways to improve their communities through shared experiences and challenges.

On Tuesday, five entrepreneurs from Japan met with representatives from the Coalfield Development Corporation to tour their facilities and learn more about their programs, specifically Refresh Appalachia and Reclaim Appalachia, as many of the entrepreneurs have backgrounds in agriculture.

The tour began in Holden, West Virginia, on about 50 acres of land that was mountaintop mined and reclaimed in the late 1990s, which Reclaim and Refresh Appalachia are now working to transform into usable land.

Following this tour the group traveled to Huntington, where they were given a tour of the West Edge Factory, which houses a number of job training programs.

Once the tours were complete, the group used translators to learn more about the programs, inquiring about who makes up the bulk of the workforce, where does most of the funding come from and how are they able to train entrepreneurs without also creating competition for Coalfield Development's programs.

Betty Borden, director of Japan Society's Innovators Network, which facilitated the trip from the United States, said one of the main goals of this exchange of ideas is to find ways to revitalize and grow rural communities in Japan.

While both sides of the table have the same goal, Borden said the root cause of their challenges is very different.



Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch. Property manager Luke Huffman displays a repurposed product while giving a tour to rural revitalizers from U.S. and Japan at West Edge, Coalfield Development Corporation, Monday, Oct. 23, 2017 in Huntington.

In rural communities across the U.S., towns are struggling to keep young people as jobs move to bigger cities and abroad, but in Japan, Borden said the problem is the aging population, declining birthrate and historically low immigration.

However, the hope is that by bringing outside minds together, solutions can be developed to benefit both sides.

Atsuhisa Emori, general manager of the Nippon Taberu Journal League, a monthly publication that features articles about local producers and their food and creates a community that works to solve regional challenges, found that he had been able to relate to many of the Refresh Appalachia programs.

Emori said he was most interested in Refresh Appalachia's Farm Share Subscription Program, which weekly distributes produce from local farmers directly to the consumers.

As part of this process, Savannah Lyons, program director of Refresh Appalachia and Food Hub manager, said producers try to let

their customers know where the fresh produce is coming from each week in order to add more value to their products.

Emori said the art of storytelling to interest consumers in local products is something he also uses.

When working on a project, Emori said it's helpful to get an outsider's perspective in order to cultivate fresh thinking and new ideas that can hopefully lead to different types of engagement.

Oftentimes the failure of one community can lead to success in another, Emori said.

Ryoko Sato, an associate professor at Ehime University's Research Center for Regional Community Innovation in Japan, said the part of the day she found most interesting was the tour of Reclaim Appalachia's facility in Holden.

With the U.S. being such a large country, she said she admired the fact that leaders in Reclaim Appalachia were driven and determined to revitalize an area that presented them with many challenges, rather than chose an area where growth would be easier.

While Japan does not have a problem with abandoned mines, Sato said the country does have abandoned farms that could benefit from a similar program.

Though it is too soon to tell what new ideas will come out of this partnership, Sato and Emori said the best way for it to be successful is for it to continue long term.

This program was made possible by the Japan Society and the Japan NPO center, which specialize in working with nonprofits. It is part of a two-year project called Resilient and Vibrant Communities in Japan and the U.S. which brings together leaders of local American organizations with corresponding leaders from Japan to help better address today's challenges and prepare for the challenges that may arise tomorrow.

Having started their journey in Charleston and Huntington, the group will travel next to Ohio and Nebraska to conduct similar meetings.

After nearly 20 meetings and site visits around the U.S., a culminating public forum "Are Rural Communities Doomed? Changemakers Say No!" will place at the Japan Society on Monday, Oct. 30, in New York.

Then in the fall of 2018, Borden said the second leg of the project will take American participants to Japan, after which a report will be published sharing insights from the full project.



Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch. Rural revitalizers from U.S. and Japan look over the micro green room during a tour at West Edge, Coalfield Development Corporation, Monday, Oct. 23, 2017 in Huntington.

http://www.herald-dispatch.com/news/japanese-w-va-entrepreneurs-find-common-ground-in-growth-challenges/article_f47b5f6a-a810-5af7-b49e-ba7bbb2c26fb.html