



## Aerospace

**Yes,** on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

### *Mobilizing the Gulf Coast*

The gathering in October in Bay Minette, Ala., seemed at times like a pep rally as speaker after speaker talked about the tanker contest pitting Boeing against the Northrop Grumman/EADS team. The message was clear: Northrop/EADS – and by virtue of that, Mobile, Ala. – would again win the contest.

The jury, of course, is still out on the \$40 billion Air Force tanker contest. In fact, Northrop in early December threatened to pull out of the competition altogether on grounds the requirements are tilted in Boeing's favor. But no matter how the tanker fight ends, the gathering marked an escalation in the region's bid to become an aerospace powerhouse.

Call it the mobilization of the Gulf Coast.

The October event was to announce the formation of the Aerospace Alliance, a public/private organization designed to promote a four-state region's aerospace capabilities. The 501(c)(6) group says it will advocate for policies, programs and specific projects on the local, state and national level to enhance growth of the aerospace sector.

With formation of the Aerospace Alliance, there are now at least five regional initiatives focusing on aerospace in the region. The efforts vary in scope, agenda and method, but share the common theme of telling the Gulf Coast aerospace story.

And that's good, says George Freeland, executive director of the Jackson County Economic Development Foundation. He's been involved for years in cooperative projects focusing on the aerospace region, and sees the state-level effort as a natural progression.

"Multi-state regionalism has expanded and increased in scope, particularly in the aerospace sector," said Freeland. "It is extraordinarily important. It demonstrates a continued evolution of the region. It wasn't all that long ago that South Mississippi wasn't even connecting its own dots."

### **Mississippi efforts**

Six counties from the Mississippi Gulf Coast Alliance for Economic Development have been "connecting the dots" through a regional aerospace program for nearly four years now.

In May 2006 the group launched a Web site, Mississippi Gulf Coast Aerospace Corridor, which highlights aerospace activities in South Mississippi and the broader Gulf Coast. In the summer of 2010 it will publish the fifth edition of an annual 50-page reference book. They also have sites and books on shipbuilding, advanced materials, marine science and geospatial technologies - and a quarterly sci-tech newsletter.

That they found common ground is remarkable, considering the five sectors do not impact them equally. Though each member of a regional group naturally places a priority on jobs in its own back yard, this group concluded they all benefit in the larger scheme of things.

"Our Gulf Coast Alliance has matured. It's evolved to a point that it's intelligent, thoughtful, and pursues meaningful regional cooperation. We have taken it upon ourselves to document and create an inventory and promote the region in a meaningful way. We will continue to do that," said Freeland.

Since the group's aerospace Web site was launched, other initiatives have launched. In Mobile there's the Mobile County Commission's "Keep Our Tanker" project, notable for mustering regional support for Northrop's tanker bid. In Northwest Florida there's the three-county Gulf Coast Aerospace and Defense Coalition, designed to promote Northwest Florida as a location for



www.mscoast.org • hcdc@mscoast.org  
12281 Intraplex Parkway • Gulfport, MS 39503  
Phone: 228-896-5020 • Fax: 228-896-6020



# Aerospace

**Yes,** on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

aerospace companies.

There's also the Stennis-Michoud Aerospace Corridor Alliance, formed by the office of Sen. David Vitter of Louisiana, which is exploring ways to promote Stennis Space Center, Miss., and Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans. There's also privately run Gulf Coast Aerospace Corridor Web site, which highlights aerospace news and data from New Orleans to Northwest Florida.

Freeland doesn't see the other initiatives as competition, but rather as an indication of the growing understanding that aerospace is important for the region's future. Creation of the Aerospace Alliance is just another step up the regional ladder from the more local levels.

## Getting the word out

Alabama Gov. Bob Riley sees the Aerospace Alliance as a way to tell the South's aerospace story. In his remarks during the Bay Minette event, Riley alluded to the sometimes negative comments made about the region by Boeing supporters.

"Last year taught us something: While we all know about our long tradition of aerospace excellence and the quality and skill sets of our work force, obviously some parts of the country might not be aware. We are going to educate them," he said.

Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour reiterated the publicity aspect, saying the group "will go far in promoting our region for what it is – one of the largest aerospace corridors in the world and a great place for companies in this sector to do business."

According to its Web site, the Aerospace Alliance's mission is "to establish the Southeast region as a world-class aerospace and aviation corridor." It says members share the goal "of promoting the region's common assets and long-standing tradition of excellence in the aerospace industry to take advantage of opportunities to grow the sector in the region."

There's little doubt the South and Gulf Coast are on the radar of the aerospace industry, and have been for quite some time. If there's any group that isn't aware, it may be politicians and the general public.

It's a good bet the formation of the Aerospace Alliance was noted by the Pacific Northwest. Not only has Washington been in a dogfight with Alabama for the tanker project, but it has a broader concern about the South in general. Boeing's decision to set up a second assembly line for the 787 in South Carolina has caused concern, and this just adds to the grief.

The Aerospace Alliance seems to be a work in progress. At this writing, members are the states of Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. Florida isn't a member, but an economic group of 16 counties in the Panhandle, Florida's Great Northwest, is.

Neal Wade, director of the Alabama Development Office and the chief contact for the Aerospace Alliance, said he hopes that at some point all of Florida will be involved. As he sees it, the group is an umbrella organization interested in aerospace activities in any of the four states. But for now, the focus is on winning the tanker.

"The thing that's on the front burner is the tanker," said Wade, adding that the group wants to ensure the tanker competition is fair. "We also recognize that, were we to win, it's an important cornerstone."

The project would bring thousands of direct/indirect jobs to the region, and lead to the assembly of Airbus freighters. With the tanker program, the Gulf Coast would be one of the few locations in the world that build large-body aircraft.

But win or lose, Wade said the group will have a life beyond that.

- David Tortorano



www.mscoast.org • hcdc@mscoast.org  
12281 Intraplex Parkway • Gulfport, MS 39503  
Phone: 228-896-5020 • Fax: 228-896-6020