

News Release

For Immediate Release

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SPELL WELCOMES JAPANESE TRADE DELEGATION: KENAF JOINT VENTURE TOPIC FOR DISCUSSION

(Jackson) A trade delegation from Japan investigating several investment opportunities received a warm welcome from Lester Spell, Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC). Representatives from the O-G Corporation and Tokan Kogyo arrived in Jackson last night for a 4-day tour of the state. "The Japanese business community is very interested in Mississippi," Spell said. "I believe the work we are doing now will translate into jobs for our citizens very soon."

High on the delegation's list of priorities is construction of a "mini mill" to process kenaf, a plant native to Africa and Asia that grows well in Mississippi. It has many uses, but has tremendous potential as a non-wood pulp source for paper. Kenaf is being grown at both commercial and test sites in several Mississippi locations, including the Delta, northeast Mississippi and Forrest County in the southeastern part of the state. "Research indicates that Mississippi's soil and climate is ideal for growing kenaf," said Spell. "Because of continued regulations and restrictions on logging in many parts of the world, kenaf could become Mississippi's newest cash crop."

Many people first heard about kenaf during the Olympic Games in Nagano, Japan. A major American fast food chain used kenaf to make paper products at all of its Olympic outlets. But, while the world attention is new, state and regional trade officials have been working with kenaf for some time. In fact, this is the second trip by Japanese officials to Mississippi in relation to the mill project, and state officials have traveled to Japan on three different occasions. "This is a real possibility," says Roger Barlow, Director of the Market Development Division at MDAC. "The interest is there and we believe the market is there."

The delegation will be in Jackson until Tuesday, then depart for meetings with both the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and Mississippi State University. They will return to Jackson late Thursday before returning home Friday morning.