

WEDC exploring how to better support small rural manufacturers

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WEDC Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes says the agency is exploring how to better support small rural manufacturers in Wisconsin.

“What kinds of resources do they have? And how can we partner with resources like the tech colleges or the university system to make sure that we’re providing the support for these businesses?” she said yesterday during a meeting of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. Board of Directors.

Hughes highlighted the overlap between the state’s small business community and manufacturing sector, noting around 80 percent of the state’s 9,300 manufacturing companies have fewer than 50 employees.

About half of those companies are involved with “traditional manufacturing” such as fabricated metals or machinery, while the other half are involved with food processing, textiles, paper and other product categories. And while about three-fourths of manufacturers in Wisconsin are located around Milwaukee, Madison and the northeast region, the rest are “out-state, in rural Wisconsin,” Hughes said.

“Thinking about those businesses and what kind of support they need and who’s providing them support around the state, and how they start to think about what their opportunities are, where they need to pivot and what our role is in supporting them,” she said.

She also pointed to larger companies such as Oshkosh Corporation and Milwaukee Tool that are driving growth in areas such as advanced and precision manufacturing, emphasizing their importance for the state's workforce. Hughes noted Oshkosh Corporation has a \$6 billion engineering contract with the U.S. Postal Service fleet in the state, while Milwaukee Tool is conducting research and development into next-generation battery technologies.

"If we can, you know, think about keeping those jobs and keeping the precision manufacturing, the advanced manufacturing, I think that ultimately that will serve Wisconsin very well," she said.