

Maine's home to great innovators, entrepreneurs

By U.S. Sen. Angus King
(I-Maine)

I am frequently asked what the most limiting factor to innovation and entrepreneurship in Maine is. The truth is that our attitude and imagination are the only limiting factors, but creating a business friendly environment and supportive infrastructure are two important steps to unleashing great ideas here at home.

The good news is that there are countless small businesses throughout the state that are adopting new technologies and marketing strategies to help enhance, grow, and expand their operations. I saw this firsthand on my recent trip to Washington County where I met with local business and community leaders to talk about what they are doing, the challenges they face, and what can be done to help promote economic growth. Here are just a few examples of Maine innovators Down East who are helping move our state economy forward:

Situated in the St. Croix River Valley along the border between New Brunswick, Canada and Baileyville, Maine, Woodland Pulp Mill has been demonstrating how our traditional industries can adapt to the demands of the 21st century. I was

impressed to learn that they have become 100 percent energy self-sufficient and have successfully incorporated alternative, cleaner energy sources, such as natural gas, into their day-to-day operations. This, and the use of other new technologies, has allowed them to reduce costs and increase profit margins while adhering to environmentally responsible practices that ensure our forests will remain a valuable resource for generations to come.

Similar to our forestry industry, in recent years Maine's fishing industry has faced a host of new challenges that require innovative solutions to meet constantly evolving market demands. Historically, a lack of processing facilities has meant that our fishermen have had to send their catch out of state for processing. A.C. Inc., a lobster and seafood processor located on Beals Island, is seeking to help reverse that trend by working to develop a prototype for an advanced processing facility that would enable fishing communities to retain more of their product value locally while also creating new job opportunities and a more sustainable industry.

Finding new ways to create jobs was a common theme I heard throughout my two-day trip in Washington County. In my

meeting with Chief Joseph Socobasin and Vice Chief Clayton Sockabasin of the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township, they shared their vision to generate job growth by opening a bottling plant and selling water to consumers who live outside the tribal land. The area is filled with natural springs and using this resource to promote economic development would help strengthen the tribal community by creating up to 70 jobs, providing new revenue for schools, public safety, and healthcare. As bottled water sales increase across the county, this represents an exciting opportunity for the Passamaquoddy to help tribe members make ends meet and continue living on their ancestral lands.

To help these initiatives take root it is important that our business and communities have the necessary tools to connect with markets in state and around the world. I've been a longtime advocate of increasing and improving rural broadband access in Maine. We took a step forward in connecting rural areas to the rest of the world through the Three Ring Binder broadband project, which provides a backbone for high speed internet, but there is still a lot of work to be done. Axiom Technologies, based in Machias, has taken a leadership

position in this effort by facilitating further broadband development and digital literacy opportunities in the region. During a breakfast with community leaders at UMaine Machias, I was thrilled to learn how Axiom is helping local businesses grow by providing broadband access and digital tools to rural areas. These vital communications resources help connect our entrepreneurs to markets beyond our borders.

Maine does not suffer from a shortage of great ideas to improve economic development and create good-paying jobs. What we need is to help turning those ideas into a reality by making sure that our innovators and entrepreneurs are equipped for success in the 21st century. At the federal level, the most important thing Congress could do to improve the business climate is to competently perform its most basic functions—passing a budget in timely manner without self-induced crises and chaos would be a good place to start. Showing that we can deal with fiscal issues in a responsible way would begin the process of restoring the American people's confidence in their government which would undoubtedly increase our future prospects for financial growth and stability.