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By Anita Weier

Gov. Jim Doyle announced at the Governor's Conference on Forestry today that he will sign a Great Lakes Forest Accord aimed at advancing the region's forest-based economy in domestic and foreign markets.

Wisconsin will join Minnesota, Michigan and Ontario, Canada, in a regional effort to address forest certification, bio-energy production and transportation, he said.

"We will strengthen our collective ability to meet global competition head on," Doyle told the 240 people gathered at Monona Terrace Convention Center, to come up with practical ways of keeping Wisconsin's forests healthy, enjoyable and profitable.

The governor noted particularly that two nations he has visited in trade missions -- China and Japan -- have a "desperate" need for forest products.

Doyle also stressed that the new Wisconsin Center for Sustainable Forestry Businesses at the USDA Forest Products Laboratory in Madison will identify, research and address issues affecting the economic growth in the state's forest products industry.

"I am also pleased to announce the establishment of the Governor's Biorefinery Consortium in Wisconsin," Doyle said. "This effort, coordinated by the Center for Technology Transfer, will not only help retain high-paying jobs in Wisconsin, but also will help create them."

Doyle and other speakers at the forestry conference -- attended by representatives of the lumber and related industries, environmental groups and government agencies -- stressed that Wisconsin has a century-long history of sustainable forestry and professional forest management.

Chief State Forester Paul DeLong said Wisconsin started planning the future of its forests in 1904, when the first state forester was appointed. "This was an appointment of great foresight on the part of the state Legislature, which recognized the value of bringing our forests back from the devastation of the cut-over (logging) period and then ensuring that such devastation would never happen again," DeLong said.

"We now have 16 million acres of forests, almost 50 percent of our state's land cover. This is a resource growing in acreage and diversity."

Noting that Doyle had designated 2004 the Year of Wisconsin Forestry, DeLong also stressed that the "Wisconsin Statewide Forest Plan" was published this year, and that the conference will help develop more detailed ways of meeting the plan's objectives.

Department of Natural Resources Secretary Scott Hassett also emphasized that the conference - sponsored by the Governor's Council on Forestry -- is expected to result in practical action plans to meet various forest challenges.

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