

EYES OF THE STORM

GLOBAL ATMOSPHERICS INC. EXPANDS LIGHTNING DETECTION EXPORTS WITH USDOC—LED ADVOCACY

by Jake Bright
Office of Public Affairs

For most people, lightning never strikes twice in the same place. But if it does, Global Atmospherics, Inc. (GAI) will know when and where. Around the world, GAI's lightning detection equipment is catching numerous lightning surges, and is also telling us at what time and location

Tunisia's Ministry of Communications. Located in Tucson, Arizona, with a staff of just over 100 employees, GAI claims to be the largest manufacturer and system integrator of lightning detection and location equipment and services in the world. GAI's comprehensive line of lightning detection systems and application tools range from simple, single-sensor devices used to monitor local and regional lightning phenomena to

country's Ministry of Communications. Working through a manufacturer representative, GAI answered the tender. Its main competitor was a French firm. Shortly thereafter, GAI learned that the tender board had chosen it as the best company for the project.

Before the deal was finalized, however, representatives of the French company in Tunis began an intense lobbying

"WE THOUGHT THAT DOC ADVOCACY WAS MORE FOR THE CORPORATE GIANTS YOU READ ABOUT IN THE PAPER. WE LEARNED FIRST, THAT THESE SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO SMALL COMPANIES, AND SECOND, THAT THEY REALLY WORK."

they will touch down. In June 1999, GAI's expertise in the field, along with the advocacy efforts of the U.S. government, helped it win a \$1 million dollar tender to supply its equipment to

fully deployed national networks that reliably and automatically measure a full range of lightning parameters.

GAI originally developed its equipment in the 1970s to detect lightning caused forest fires. The company has since worked actively to develop a national lightning detection network capable of predicting lightning over greater distances and within 20 seconds of when it strikes. Advances in GAI's technology have coincided with the discovery of other uses for lightning detection and data in an increasing number of industries. Those most prominent include aviation, communications, insurance, recreation and electric power utilities. This expanded range of applications has inevitably led GAI to develop its business internationally and it is now selling to over 40 countries.

In Tunisia, GAI responded to a government tender to create a national lightning detection network for the

effort on behalf of the competitor company to reverse the decision. Pressure from French officials led the tender board to ask the bidders to resubmit a "best and final" offer. GAI, a small company, was not able to lower its price in order to compete with the French competitor. The original tender was closed all together and each company was asked to resubmit bids to a new tender.

Realizing that they would need help if they were going to get a fair shot, GAI enlisted the advocacy services of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Vice President for Sales and Marketing, Jeff Tuel, contacted Shannon Ballard in the USDOC's Advocacy Center in Washington. "We had never used DOC advocacy before and were not sure if it was applicable to a small businesses like ourselves. The Commercial Service representative in Tunisia and the Advocacy Center in Washington jumped in with both feet and organ-



Photo courtesy of Global Atmospherics Inc.

GAI's impact sensors pick up electromagnetic signals produced by lightning to pinpoint where it strikes.

ized efforts to level the playing field on the tender, not asking favoritism toward our company, but basically saying, this is a public tender that needs to be decided within a fair public forum," said Tuel.

Ballard worked directly with the company, coordinating U.S. Government resources to ensure a fair process and facilitating contact with the U.S. & Foreign Commercial Service officers in Tunis who provided counseling on how to work with the Tunisian Government and to navigate the bid process. U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, Robin Lynn Raphel, contacted the Minister of Communications, personally, seeking a transparent bid process.

According to Ballard, U.S. Government led advocacy is indispensable when comparing foreign governments' aggressive and sometimes corrupt, activities geared towards winning contracts for national firms. "This is why we exist," she said referring to the DOC's Advocacy Center and other advocacy activities of the U.S. Government. "A lot of small companies have great capabilities but not much leverage on the ground when bidding abroad. They will see a tender that is released, bid on it with the understanding that it is going to be an open and transparent process, and then, at the eleventh hour, the decision goes the other way. Sometimes all it takes is making it clear to the host government that the U.S. Government is interested in the outcome of the process, that everyone is given the same chance, and that whoever ends up winning the bid should win because they have the best technical and commercial offer."

The U.S. Government provides these advocacy efforts to any U.S. exporter facing what they perceive as unfair hurdles in new markets. Since November 1993, the USDOC's Advocacy Center has stepped up its efforts, helping U.S. exporters win over 500 projects around the world, valued at an estimated \$120 billion.

GAI's Jeff Tuel was both impressed and surprised by DOC's advocacy efforts.



Lightning strikes a utility pole. GAI's systems could have detected the time and location 20 seconds in advance.

Photo courtesy of Global Atmospherics Inc.

"When I first called the Department of Commerce, I was not sure what kind of attention a small company like ours would get. I was absolutely amazed at both the timeliness and attention we received. I thought the DOC advocacy was more for the corporate giants that you read about in the paper. The team that responded, both in Washington and in Tunisia, was very helpful in educating us on what the advocacy group could do and providing the counterbalance to the French Government's efforts. So, we really learned first, that these services are available to small companies, and second, that they really work. This award had a fairly significant impact

on our annual sales, accounting for 13 percent of total international business for 1999."

GAI continues to pursue contracts for its lightning detection technology abroad and sees advocacy as increasingly important. It has already had a similar experience to Tunisia during a bid process in Morocco. In the long run, GAI aims to expand its experience, technology, and expertise to more and more countries throughout the world. ■

For more information about the Advocacy Center, please turn to page nine.