

**TESTIMONY OF
TIM ALFORD, PH.D.
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 26, 2007
WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. Chairman, other distinguished members of the Committee:

It is my honor and pleasure to appear before the Committee to share my views on the effectiveness of existing federal programs in helping workers impacted by international trade. I do so from the vantage point of a state director of workforce development who has responsibility for leadership, oversight, and coordination of all such programs. Therefore, I am a generalist and claim neither particular experience nor expertise in the minutia of regulations, eligibility criteria, or other such issues related to the day-to-day administration of such programs.

I come here from the convoluted vantage point of a former teacher, principal, superintendent, college administrator and instructor, economic developer, small business owner, business consultant, and mayor. I also come here as a first generation college student whose single-parent mother worked in the sweat-shop shirt factories of rural south Alabama in the 1940s, 50s and 60s to make a subsistence living for us. I point this out to let you know that I have a heart for those hard-working persons who are adversely impacted by international trade as well as the escalating workplace skill requirements in our nation and in my state in particular. I think the Southern Regional Education Board said it best when it stated: "It is as if many of our

workers dozed off by the wood stove and awakened by the microwave...” unprepared or underprepared for the skill demands of a 21st century global, innovation economy.

It is this global economy that has ushered tens of thousands of Alabama citizens out of textile, apparel, and low-skill assembly occupations. It is likewise this global knowledge economy that has bankrupted a traditional southern economic development strategy based on cheap land and cheap, unskilled labor. We all know there is cheaper land and cheaper labor elsewhere in a global economy; there is even the relatively new phenomenon of cheaper **skilled** labor.

At the same time that many Alabama citizens suffered from such job loss, globalization was bringing vast new opportunities to those in our state who prepared for them. Although this transformation had already quietly begun, the Mercedes project brought new attention and impetus to Alabama as a player in the global economy. Now our state is approaching almost 50,000 employees in the automotive sector alone – having added more than 100,000 workers to the civilian labor force in the last 3-4 years. Alabama is not only creating jobs, it is creating **good** jobs as evidenced by our state’s recent gains in relation to national per capita income. We have experienced growth not only in the automotive sector but in other advanced manufacturing sectors such as aerospace, aviation, and shipbuilding as well as high tech service sectors such as healthcare and finance. Practically every month brings a new record low in unemployment.

Throughout my life in south Alabama, the question has been “Where are the jobs?” In the

past few years, it has increasingly become “Where are the workers?” and now it is “Where are the workers with the skills I need?”

So ... we are engaged in a massive effort to help our people transition from that old “cheap land, cheap labor” economy to a 21st century innovation economy characterized by advanced manufacturing and high tech services. In order to compete, businesses must be more innovative and productive which requires utilizing more technology which requires higher worker skill levels which requires more and better education and training.

We are attacking the education and training imperative on many fronts. We are implementing what I consider to be the most comprehensive, integrated career readiness certification program in the country. We are adding state resources for Alabama Industrial Development Training – our nationally-number-one-ranked training arm for new and expanding industry. We are engaged in K-12 reforms such as the Alabama Reading and STEMs initiatives.

But we definitely need the federal government’s continued investment in our people if we are to succeed. What should be the nature and extent of that involvement? I would make some general recommendations in response to that question and I will be more specific if you have questions. In my view:

- 1) All federal workforce development programs should be developed as part of a comprehensive, integrated, holistic array of services that complement one another as opposed to isolated, stand-alone programs designed by various agencies for various

populations with various purposes and various requirements. We still have a ways to go to achieve your WIA vision of a seamless delivery system.

- 2) I think we must increasingly recognize and provide incentives in the development of career lattices and ladders which begin at levels commensurate with the skills that workers possess and move them up with concurrent or intermittent work and training.
- 3) Likewise, we must deliver education and training outside the normal academic calendar and delivery system. (When workers at Avondale Mills lost their jobs, most did not have the luxury of going back to school for 2 years – even if we paid for it. They have mortgages and car payments due next week.) We must compress training when possible and we must deliver it in ways that allow people to work concurrently. (These people certainly do not need a re-training schedule consisting of a one-hour class on Tuesdays and Thursdays and a one-hour class on Mondays and Wednesdays.)
- 4) I think we must customize options for individuals. In the old linear paradigm in which you learned, then earned, then retired, many of these programs sufficed. Now as constant and pervasive job churning escalates and skill requirements constantly increase, we must develop individual education plans that truly support lifelong learning in the midst of work.
- 5) To the degree possible, I recommend you push decisions about the appropriateness of training programs and training facilities to the level closest to the customer.
- 6) To put all this together, we must employ professionals, not practitioners. They should be trained, certified, evaluated and compensated accordingly. They must be connected to reliable and valid labor market information and they must help our citizens connect with jobs leading them to self-sufficiency. (I can show you Career Centers with the same

programs and staffing patterns that achieve entirely different results principally because of one's dedicated, dynamic professionals.)

- 7) Finally, I think the public workforce system, regardless of whatever programs are being considered, must be better connected to businesses in real and meaningful ways if we are to meet their needs and thus help our people meet the skill demands of our 21st century economy.

Before coming to my current job, I was mayor of Enterprise, Alabama – a town of 25,000 people adjacent to the Army Aviation Center at Fort Rucker in south Alabama. (Yes, it's the same Enterprise that was ravaged by a tornado three weeks ago, killing 9 people – 8 of whom were high school students – and destroying an elementary school and the high school as well as 500 homes.) Once before in its history, the area's cotton-dependent economy was ravaged by the boll weevil, forcing the farmers to diversify their crops and leading them to peanuts which became a better cash crop. As a result, the City Council erected a monument to the boll weevil in middle of Main Street. On one level, it stands as a slight source of embarrassment. On another, it is a proud testimony to turning adversity into opportunity.

I think the boll weevil story is a perfect metaphor for our U.S. competitiveness as bound up in its workers. The economic transitions have brought great hardships and will continue to do so. But if we cushion that to the degree that we can while developing the national sense of urgency and political will to answer these challenges – it might just be a boll weevil.

If properly conceived and integrated, continuation of Trade Act Assistance can play a vital role in this regard.