

Bridgestone Firestone wins 'corporate citizenship' award

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The Wilson Bridgestone Firestone tire plant is one of the three latest winners of the N.C. Commerce Department's North Carolina International and Economic Development Awards.

The award goes to good corporate citizens whose employees enrich the communities in which they live through their philanthropic and volunteer activities.

Bridgestone Firestone won the large company category for the volunteer endeavors of its 1,900 workers.

The company's employees were recognized for efforts such as collecting seven tractor-trailer loads of school supplies for children in Liberia, a country in Africa, where Bridgestone Firestone operates a rubber plant. Liberia is coming out of a 14-year civil war that devastated the country's infrastructure, including schools and school supplies. In the project, the plant collaborated with Wilson Education Partnership and the Wilson County School System. From the Wilson containers, Liberian children received used textbooks, old library books, school supplies, computers and school furniture.

In addition, Bridgestone Firestone supports many local organizations through trust fund contributions and hands-on volunteer work including numerous boys and girls clubs, school, environmental, and business and professional organizations.

This year, the company also began developing a wildlife habitat on an unused section of its Wilson property that will be used by local groups for educational purposes.

Jim Pridgen, plant manager, said he was proud to accept the award Thursday on the plant's behalf. He was among about 150 people who attended an awards luncheon at the Koury Center in Raleigh to learn the results.

"My heartfelt thanks go to the people who work in the Wilson plant and make us successful so we are able to reach out into the community," Pridgen said. The "community" extends beyond Wilson, he said.

"And my thanks and appreciation goes to the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce for recognizing our people's contributions."

This is the sixth consecutive year for the award, which is designed to honor foreign-owned companies that embrace the North Carolina communities in which they do business, according to a press release. Bridgestone Firestone is based in Japan.

Twelve finalists in three categories -- small companies with fewer than 150 employees, mid-sized companies with 151 to 550 workers, and large companies with more than 550 workers -- were chosen from applications submitted to DOC's International Trade Division. Site selection committees then visited with all 12 companies to choose the three winners.

"We are very lucky that these exemplary corporate citizens -- both the nominees and winners -- have chosen to call North Carolina home and to do business here," said Commerce Sec. Jim Fain. "All of them are excellent models of outstanding corporate citizenship."

HighReach Learning, the winner in the small company category, is a Canadian-based creator and direct supplier of early childhood educational materials. Community service at this company, which employs 80 workers in Charlotte, includes monthly bake sales to provide free school supplies to teachers and students in low-income schools. Employees volunteer the baking time and 100 percent of the profits go towards purchasing needed supplies. The company also raised more than \$10,000 to help rebuild a child development center in New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

The winner in the mid-sized category, Danish biotechnology company Novozymes, was recognized for the good works of its employees, particularly in the areas of the humanities, education and environmental protection. Novozymes' Franklinton plant is the second largest enzyme production facility in the world and the largest employer in Franklin County with 450 full-time workers.

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