

[By Bruce Edwards](#)

Thomas Donahue of the Rutland Region Chamber of Commerce called it the "bright light in the Rutland economy" — and with good reason.

Donahue was referring to the GE Aviation plants in Rutland that employ 1,050 workers in what are regarded as the highest paying manufacturing jobs in the region — jobs that start at \$26 an hour.

On Monday, Donahue along with several officials, including Rep. Peter Welch and Jamie Stewart of the Rutland Economic Development Corp., toured the massive Windcrest Road plant in Rutland Town.

Welch and the others were briefed on the outlook for the Rutland operation, which manufactures compressor and fan blades for a variety of commercial and military jet engines.

The local operation also includes a smaller facility on Columbian Avenue in the city.

"This year every (engine) program was up for us," plant manager Dan DiBattista said during a walk through of the 528,000-square-foot plant. "And when we look out over the next two to three years, it looks very healthy."

DiBattista's rosy outlook is driven by an uptick in the commercial engine business.

The company's new fuel-efficient engine, the GEnx, which powers Boeing's newest aircraft — the 787 Dreamliner — is one part of the story.

GE has invested \$60 million to build and outfit an addition to the plant specifically to make parts for the GENx. DiBattista also said GE has seen an increase in spare parts orders for a number of engines.

To meet demand, GE has added approximately 100 jobs, bringing total employment at the two plants to 1,050 workers.

He said the current level of employment is right-sized to meet demand.

"For attrition, as people retire, we'll keep hiring to keep that number there, so we're going to be stable," DiBattista said.

The surge in orders has had a ripple effect on Ellison Surface Technologies, a GE subcontractor. Ellison has increased the workforce at its North Clarendon plant, where a thermal spray coating is applied to the compressor and fan blades. The coating reduces friction and extends the life of the engine parts.

Ellison spokesman Eric Dolby said in an email that local employment has grown from 100 employees at the end of last year to 127 so far this year.

"Based on growth projections, we expect to create an additional 30 jobs by the end of 2013," Dolby said.

The Kentucky-based company, has opened a second Rutland facility to handle the increased workload.

"Long-term outlook for Ellison Surface Technologies in Rutland is excellent," Dolby said. "The global aviation industry is strong, with major OEMs maintaining impressive backlogs for new aircraft and engines."

GE Rutland has filled job openings through its apprentice program. Several apprentice employees were on hand during the plant tour.

Brian Grady returned home to Rutland from New York, where he was employed as a landscape surveyor.

A 1998 graduate of Mount Saint Joseph Academy, Grady is enrolled in the three-year machinist program.

"I came in here with real entry level skills and they got me up to speed," said Grady, a graduate of North Carolina State University. "We're all from different backgrounds."

Grady said initially the toughest part of the program was managing his time.

"We work an eight- to 10-hour day, then you have about three hours of class at night, plus homework and personal life," he said.

In the past, production at the local plants was often equally divided between military and commercial jet engines. But DiBattista said that's changed with commercial engine orders now accounting for 80 percent of local production with the remaining 20 percent military.

But defense spending along with domestic programs face automatic cuts by the end of the year unless Congress agrees on a combination of spending cuts and tax increases.

Welch, a Democrat, said the sequestering of funds, as it has become known, should never happen.

"The problem we have is that Congress can't get its act together to do what needs to be done, which is a balanced approach where we (have) everything on the table," he said. Welch said that includes not only spending cuts but tax increases.

He said a better approach is the bipartisan deal that resulted in the reauthorization of funding for the Export-Import Bank of the United States.

He said the Export-Import Bank is an important financing tool for companies like GE.

"We work with our manufacturers and Republicans and Democrats on a bipartisan basis passed the reauthorization," he said. "That's the model that has to work, if we're going to succeed."

The Export-Import Bank provides "gap" financing for exports that traditional lenders won't cover.

DiBattista said GE Aviation benefits from the program since 52 percent of its revenues come from export sales or \$9 billion in 2011.

According to GE, overall engine production rates are expected to increase nearly 12 percent, from 3,000 commercial and military engine deliveries last year to 3,350 deliveries in 2012.

The Rutland plants are also working on orders placed at the 2010 Farnborough International Air Show in Great Britain where GE racked up engine and service orders totalling more than \$16 billion.

The show alternates every other year with the Paris Air Show.