

Sen. Collins receives awards at New Balance factory

By Erin Rhoda erhoda@mainetoday.com

Staff Writer

NORRIDGEWOCK — When New Balance factory employees looked up from stitching, stamping and assembling hundreds of athletic shoes on Monday, they saw an uncommon sight: Republican U.S. Sen. **Susan Collins** walking between the rows of industrial sewing machines with a trail of staff.

Wearing her brown-and-tan New Balance sneakers, Collins shook hands, asked questions, posed for photographs and learned about new projects at the only athletic shoe company that still produces footwear in the United States.

She was at the 353-employee facility on Depot Street not just to learn about the two-week-old option for customers to personalize their shoes with specific colors, laces and logos, or to learn about a developing project to make water-friendly shoes for the Navy SEALs, a special operations force.

Collins was also in Norridgewock to accept an award from the National Association of Manufacturers for her legislative record supporting manufacturing during the 2009-10 legislative year. The association represents more than 11,000 companies nationwide.

Thirty-nine senators have received the award for maintaining a voting record of 70-percent or higher on pro-manufacturing legislation, said Joe Trauger, vice president of human resources and policy at the manufacturers association.

Collins, who was first elected in 1996 and again in 2002 and 2008, received a 77-percent key-vote rating.

At the awards ceremony attended by the factory's employees, Collins said the first thing she asked when she learned about the award was, "was it made in the USA?" It was.

Collins said she wants to preserve manufacturing jobs like those at New Balance. The company employs more than 800 workers in Maine and had \$1.07 billion in domestic sales in 2009, with \$1.65 billion worldwide.

"I want to do all I can do in Washington to help ensure those great manufacturing jobs stay in Maine, stay in America," she said. "We must always be capable of making things."

To keep manufacturing jobs in the U.S., legislators can do a number of things, she said in an interview:

- * make sure regulations do not put undue financial burdens on companies;
- * extend, again, the federal research and development tax credit to provide companies with an incentive to conduct long-term research projects in the U.S.;
- * preserve the Berry Amendment, which requires the Department of Defense to purchase clothing and shoes produced in the U.S.

New Balance, which also has 334 employees in its Skowhegan manufacturing facility and 151 in its Norway facility, produces shoes sold on military bases, in addition to running, outdoor, wellness, training, tennis, lifestyle and team footwear for men, women and children.

The company pays a "competitive hourly wage with full benefits" to its employees, said Amy Dow, senior manager for corporate communications.

Vivian Browne, of Madison, was making woven labels to go on shoe tongues when Collins stopped by her work station to talk briefly. It takes 32 different work stations to make one type of shoe, and some stations complete more than one process.

"I've never shaken a senator's hand before," Browne said. "Coming out into the workforce, that's awesome."

Erin Rhoda -- 474-9534

erhoda@centralmaine.com