

Congressman lends ear to concerns over fuel

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U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander got a firsthand look Monday at how rising fuel prices are affecting companies in northeastern Louisiana.

Alexander, R-Quitman, spent about an hour visiting with company leaders at the Ouachita Coca-Cola Bottling plant — which has an annual payroll of \$7.4 million for its 250 employees. The congressman tries to visit the company at least once a year.

"We were able to talk to Congressman Alexander about the economy as

a whole and the increase in gas and cost of production," said Keith Biedenharn, sales center manager. "These are very tough economic times, and we're hurting like everybody else."

A major topic of discussion during the meeting was the rising cost of fuel prices, Biedenharn said. The facility uses about 225,000 gallons of fuel a year to distribute its products.

Another concern centered on the rising cost of corn syrup, which is used in the manufacturing process. Demand for corn as a fuel source has reduced the available supply of corn for other uses, that in turn has caused an increase in corn syrup prices.

"It's having a direct and indirect im-

pact on our operating expenses," Biedenharn said. "We'd like to know whether there's going to be stability in those areas in the next two to three years."

Alexander is touring the region while Congress is taking five weeks off. The congressman said he is pushing for more drilling off the nation's coastlines to help increase the supply of oil.

"We are supporting offshore drilling domestically where we know we have reserves," Alexander said. "We have not been in a bind as a nation before like we have the last two months."

To increase the domestic oil supply, Alexander said he supports lifting a congressional moratorium on drilling on

the continental shelf. He also said the state has resources it can draw on such as oil, gas, coal and wind power.

"The high cost of fuel has had a profoundly negative impact, and we've got to correct it," Alexander said.

Biedenharn said the company has already begun internal initiatives to cut costs and become more energy efficient. Those initiatives include the recycling of plastic bottles, paper and cardboard, the installation of energy-efficient lighting and transitioning its transportation fleet to hybrid vehicles.

"In the last two years, we've done a great job with it," Biedenharn said. "We're trying to be good stewards and keep our costs lower."