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By Keiichi Hirose

IMABARI, March 31, Kyodo - (EDS: FOURTH OF FIVE BIZTREND NEWS FOCUS STORIES ON HIGH-TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES)

While many Japanese towel makers are struggling due to the flood of cheap imports from other parts of Asia, some are starting to find a new niche in exporting high-quality towels.

One company that has adopted this strategy is Ikeuchi Towel Co. in Imabari, Ehime Prefecture.

Imabari produces 60 percent of the towels in Japan but has been losing ground to cheap imports from China and Vietnam since the second half of the 1990s.

Many local towel makers have sought import curbs to stem the tide.

But, Keishi Ikeuchi, president of Ikeuchi Towel, refused to throw in the towel. He became determined to do "something that stands out."

Ikeuchi, 56, worked at Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. for 13 years before taking over his family business in 1983. He focuses on "high value-added towels that China can't imitate."

"There's no longer any value in making the same products as China does," Ikeuchi said.

His themes are "regional characteristics" and "safety and environment."

He developed a variety of original towels, including those made from organic materials. But sales did not pick up and cheap Chinese imports continued to flood the market.

But the opening of the Onomichi (Hiroshima Prefecture)-Imabari route of the Honshu-Shikoku Expressway in 1999 provided a major turning point for Ikeuchi.

Counting on an increase in tourists to the region, Ikeuchi came up with a towel that uses threads of differing material and thickness to invoke the image of the waves of the Seto Inland Sea, which faces Imabari.

The towel has been popular with environmentally minded consumers at home and abroad -- despite the hefty price tag of \$40 to \$50 each.

The company uses only wind-generated power for its plant, with the message "towels woven by the wind" becoming the slogan for the Ikeuchi Towel.

It won the Best New Products Award at the New York Home Textiles show in 2002.

In the United States, Hackensack University Medical Center, a major New Jersey hospital, reportedly plans to replace all its towels with those made by Ikeuchi Towel this fall.

The company is also producing a "bamboo" series of towels made from soft bamboo fiber in a tie-up with Toray Industries Inc.

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