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**Contact:** [neil.subhash@sba.gov](mailto:neil.subhash@sba.gov) | 206-553-7355

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## **Tacoma Manufacturer Awarded 2023 SBA Seattle District Exporter of the Year**

### **Jim Lee of Tool Gauge Takes Top Honors as Seattle District and Pacific Northwest Region Winner, Finalist for 2023 National Exporter of the Year**

**SEATTLE** - The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) 2023 Seattle District Exporter of the Year is Jim Lee, general manager of Tool Gauge based in Tacoma, Washington. Founded in 1966, Tool Gauge is an aerospace manufacturer specializing in complex, high-value plastic and metal assemblies for commercial aircraft manufacturers.

Lee is also the 2023 SBA Pacific Northwest Region Exporter of the Year, selected among district winners from Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, making him one of 10 finalists for the SBA National Exporter of the Year.

“Jim Lee is a great example of a leader who has leveraged the tools and resources available to implement a successful international trade strategy,” SBA Seattle District Director Kerrie Hurd said. “Through exporting, small businesses have access to 96 percent of the world’s consumers and I am honored to recognize Jim for bringing this local, family-owned business to the global market.”

“Tool Gauge is proof positive that companies can begin doing business internationally at any stage,” said Mike Fong, Regional Administrator, SBA Region 10. “The company had been in business for more than 40 years when they launched into global markets.”

The SBA Small Business Exporter of the Year award— part of [National Small Business Week](#) April 30 – May 6, 2023 – recognizes small business owners who demonstrate staying power and substantiated history as an established business with at least three years of business operation. Winners must also show growth in net worth and business expansion, increase in jobs and sales, innovativeness of products or services, response to adversity and contributions to community-oriented projects.

“Winning the SBA Exporter of the Year is an honor that we share with the whole team here,” Lee said. “This award is validation for all of us. Years ago, we launched a plan to grow this business by developing and implementing a global strategy, and we have reached those goals together.”

Lee joined Tool Gauge in October of 2015 as the Sales and Marketing Manager, with the task of growing the company’s international sales. Since 2016, Jim has utilized grant funding from the SBA [State Trade Expansion Program \(STEP\)](#) to develop new business relationships in international markets.

Since 2011, the STEP grant program has helped thousands of small businesses obtain grants and find customers in the international marketplace. Through awards to U.S. states and territories, STEP helps small businesses overcome obstacles to exporting by providing grants to cover costs associated with entering and expanding into international markets.

In Washington, these funds have been awarded to the [Washington State Department of Commerce](#) to support export assistance programs for small businesses including export vouchers, support for industry focused trade shows and trade missions, inbound buyer events, and export training.

“At Tool Gauge, we produce parts for a local aircraft manufacturer, and that manufacturer also sources components from suppliers all over the world, and some of those components include parts that we manufacture here,” Lee said. “With STEP grant funding and guidance from the WA State Department of Commerce we have been able to attend international trade shows as an effective networking tool to meet everyone we do business with under one roof.”

Since 2016, Tool Gauge has attended trade shows in locations around the world including Germany, France, England, and China. When in-person trade shows were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tool Gauge was able to leverage STEP grant funding to pivot to virtual trade shows and to develop digital marketing materials in multiple languages.

During his tenure, Lee has rebranded the company, launched an international sales program, developed a sales and estimating team, and launched effective global marketing campaigns. Since 2016, Tool Gauge has reported more than \$20 million in sales as a result of using the STEP program and now ships products to more than 300 destinations around the world including China, Japan, Korea, Turkey, Germany, France, Mexico, and Canada. The company has nearly doubled the size of their manufacturing facility and plans to hire 100 employees in the next five years as a result of sales growth expansion. Lee now serves Tool Gauge as the General Manager.

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A celebration honoring local SBA winners from Washington and the SBA Seattle District – which serves Washington state and northern Idaho – will be May 3, 2023 at the Museum of Flight. Other SBA local awards that will be recognized at the celebration include 8(a) Graduate of the Year, Rural Small Business of the Year, Young Entrepreneur of the Year, and Washington Small Business Person of the Year.

Each year since 1963, the President has issued a proclamation calling for the celebration of National Small Business Week. SBA recognizes outstanding small business owners for their personal successes and contributions to our nation.

For more information about National Small Business Week, visit [www.sba.gov/nsbw](http://www.sba.gov/nsbw).

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### **About the U.S. Small Business Administration**

The U.S. Small Business Administration makes the American dream of business ownership a reality. As the only go-to resource and voice for small businesses backed by the strength of the federal government, the SBA empowers entrepreneurs and small business owners with the resources and support they need to start, grow or expand their businesses, or recover from a declared disaster. It delivers services through an extensive network of SBA field offices and partnerships with public and private organizations. To learn more, visit [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov). The **Seattle District** serves Washington and northern Idaho with office locations in Seattle and Spokane.