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Biotech center gains funding

Fraunhofer USA a leader in research on plant-based vaccines

BY GARY HABER
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The Fraunhofer USA Center for Molecular Biotechnology in Newark will use \$15 million in new state and private funding to hire researchers and develop a facility to help it create vaccines for avian flu, anthrax and other diseases.

The funding, which will be doled out during the next five years, will be used in part to develop a prototype facility that will make small quantities of the plant-based vaccines the center is developing, Vidadi Yusibov, its executive director, said at a news conference Thursday.

Fraunhofer's German parent organization, the Fraunhofer Society, will provide \$10 million of the funding, and \$5 million will come from the state of Delaware.

Fraunhofer researchers are working on novel vaccines, made using plants, to treat diseases such as avian flu, sleeping sickness and influenza, and to protect against bioterrorist hazards such as anthrax and plague.

The funding would also be used to fund human clinical trials of the vaccines, some of which are now being tested in animals, to hire additional workers and add research space. Fraunhofer occupies 15,000 square feet of office and laboratory space at the Delaware Technology Park.

Since the Fraunhofer center opened in Newark in 2001, with the state and the Fraunhofer Society each contributing \$3.6 million, it has grown from two employees to 40, and attracted more than \$19 million in grants, contracts and licensing fees from organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the federal government.

"With the continued help, I can assure you we will continue growing," Yusibov told state lawmakers at a tour and luncheon he hosted for them at the center Thursday.

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Scientist Christine Farrance (from left) talks to state Rep. Wayne A. Smith, the House majority leader, state Sen. Charles Copeland and state Rep. Stephanie A. Ulbrich about her job isolating DNA from plants at Fraunhofer USA.

Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, in a statement e-mailed Thursday, stressed the importance of continued funding for the center.

"New innovations and research in biotechnology not only propel Delaware's economy, but also provide critical health benefits and protection to people across the globe," Minner said. "The Fraunhofer Center ... is conducting breaking research in the area of vaccine development, and it is important that the state continues to support these efforts."

The added funding means the center could add as many as 10 staffers in 2007, Yusibov said. Those employees, who include plant biologists and immunologists, make an average of \$70,000 a year, he said.

Lawmakers who toured the facility Thursday said the state funding is a good investment because it will bring more high-wage jobs to the First State.

"We hope there are more breakthroughs and it grows even faster than they say it will," said Rep. Joe Di Pinto, R-Wilmington West.

Fraunhofer plans to license the vaccines it develops to companies that would manufacture them and bring them to market. Delaware could see an economic boon if those companies decide to locate here, Di Pinto said.

"It has the promise of so many good things, for the people who work here and for the people who will benefit from the research that goes on here," said state Rep. Stephanie A. Ulbrich, R-Newark South.

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