

Subject: Gov. Perdue: N.C. can lead U.S. in biotech

Pub: [The Mecklenburg Times](#)

Author: Fred Tannenbaum

Category:

Sub-Category:

Issue Date: 02/24/2009 Word Count: 87

Gov. Perdue: N.C. can lead U.S. in biotech

by Fred Tannenbaum

Dolan Media Newswires

CHARLOTTE, NC -- Gov. Beverly Perdue wants North Carolina to surpass California and Massachusetts to become the nation's biotechnology leader. With the General Assembly facing an estimated \$2 billion budget shortfall for the next fiscal year, that's going to be a tall order.

But the region's researchers in biotech — a catch-all term for an industry melding science, biology, technology, energy and engineering — are bullish on the idea. At an event Thursday, researchers said Charlotte's rapidly growing facilities, including the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, will play a major role as the sector grows.

At a biotech conference in Raleigh last week, Perdue said she wants the state's scientific and medical industries to more than double during her first term, from \$45 billion in annual sales to \$100 billion.

Meanwhile, municipalities around the state are clamoring for dollars and the N.C. General Assembly will be struggling this spring to close the chasm between revenues and spending.

In other words, efforts to boost biotech may have to germinate until the economic storm clouds clear. That prospect did not dampen the enthusiasm of the hundreds of Ph.Ds who gathered Thursday for BioConnect's first awards program.

The BioNight celebration at Discovery Place, attended by 200 people, highlighted the region's strength in the pursuit of life-enhancing discoveries. BioConnect, a year-old networking group for science professionals, sponsored the event.

Simon Pedder is president and CEO of Charlotte-based Chelsea Therapeutics, which is developing medicines for fibromyalgia, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis and other conditions. He told the crowd that better days and markets for biotechnology are coming.

"Just not tomorrow," he said.

Perdue's idea is a great one, said Taffy Williams, CEO of Colonial Technology Development Co. in Concord, which consults with small and medium-sized biotech companies. Williams, who did not attend Thursday's event, acknowledged the limitations of the state's economy, but added, "It could happen — in time."

To make Perdue's goal a reality, Williams said the state needs to be more aggressive in building biotech companies. One step would be creating a new state fund for biotech ventures.

That money should be managed, Williams argued, by people who know how to run such businesses and how to build the fund. That would help entice seasoned biotech entrepreneurs from California and Massachusetts to run or advise fledgling life-science companies here.

Experienced executives could advise professors and university students who invent new medicines, devices or technology but don't have any business experience.

"We need to create a system to entice them," Williams said. "You can't just say, 'We have a great state.'"

Good Timing, Good Payoffs

The North Carolina Biotechnology Center, which offers funding and co-sponsored Thursday's event, backs Perdue's goal of making North Carolina a national biotech leader.

"If we can go from zero companies to third (among states) in a quarter-century, there's no reason to take our foot off the gas," said Chris Brodie, a spokesman with a Ph.D in molecular, cellular, developmental biology and genetics. "Biotech offers one of North Carolina's best prospects for long-term growth."

With an emphasis on agricultural biotech and fuels made from plants, such as algae, the state's industry "offers a way to spread jobs and wealth to all 100 counties," Brodie said.

Despite the recession, he believes the right economic stimulus can spur growth and prosperity faster than hunkering down and doing nothing.

"When you talk about investments in the future, biotech is one of the best," Brodie said. "Targeted, strategic investments in biotechnology can pay big dividends in terms of high-paying jobs."

Over the past 10 years, North Carolina has invested \$1.2 billion in biotech education, research and business, Brodie said. According to data from the biotech center, the industry generates \$45.8 billion in economic activity annually, and state and local governments collect \$1.4 billion each year in tax revenues.

Brodie also pointed out that North Carolina's biotech industry is the fastest growing, by far, of any of the top-10 biotech states, with an 18.5 percent boost in industry jobs between 2001 and 2006.

Biotech isn't going away, either.

"It relates to just about every aspect of our lives — food, clothing, fuel, environment, medicine and education," Brodie said. "So the biotech companies that emerge from this downturn (and the places they call home) will occupy a privileged position on the future world stage."

Blueberries and Biodiesel

At Thursday's event, Robert Wilhelm, executive director of the Charlotte Research Institute at UNC-Charlotte, pointed to signs of growth in the region's research community. Highlights include:

- * Research into brain injuries and traumatic stress disorder at the U.S. Veterans Administration hospital in Salisbury.
- * Discoveries at the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Piedmont Research Station, also in Salisbury. One finding shows that strawberries, a major crop, can be grown 40 weeks out of the year.
- * UNC-Charlotte researchers are seeking the best strains of algae from which to produce biodiesel fuels.
- * Eight universities collaborating at the research campus in Kannapolis. Among other projects, scientists from UNC-Charlotte and North Carolina State University and others are collaborating on a new project researching

the genetic sequence of blueberries. They hope to find ways to take advantage of the fruit's high nutritional value.

Kenny McDonald, executive vice president of the Charlotte Regional Partnership, cited a recent expansion at Microban International Ltd., which manufactures chemical compounds such as bacteria-resistant coatings for food containers. Groninger USA, a German company manufacturing machines that fill and cap pill bottles, also has expanded its Charlotte facility.

Despite the weak economy, there's a demand for clinical research, said McDonald, who markets the city to businesses seeking to relocate. "We want to be there and get a piece of the pie. We want those jobs and capital investment."

Many recruiting efforts focus on medical device manufacturers, McDonald said. There are 90 such companies in the Charlotte region, more than any other part of the state. Taking a poke at Research Triangle Park, home to many large pharmaceutical and biotech companies, McDonald said, "We remind the people in Raleigh about that a lot."

With budget battles sure to occur in the General Assembly this spring, the outlook for biotech may not be pretty right now, said Pedder. But there is work to be done to prepare for better days.

"What we do now to promote biotech will prepare us to survive," Pedder said. "Once (the economy) comes back, we all need to help it in Charlotte."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

© Dolan Media Newswires 2009.

Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is expressly forbidden.