

Small tech companies highlighted

by **Ken Alltucker** - Jun. 13, 2008 05:35 PM
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Even the most experienced scientist can feel like a tiny mouse in a big maze at the biotech industry's sprawling annual convention.

Consider SenesTech President Loretta Mayer's experience at the annual conference. She was tucked away in an out-of-the-way booth and resorted to handing out chocolate-covered mice to promote her company's main commercial product, a rodent-sterilization technology.

This year, Mayer's company will gain more prestigious billing and location at the Bio 2008 conference, which runs Tuesday through Friday at the San Diego Convention Center.

Arizona's economic development interests say the worldwide biotech industry event is an important way to showcase the caliber of biotech companies sprouting in Arizona. Companies covet the exposure because they can make important contacts and draw attention and money to their product or technology.

"This allows us to align ourselves with a state that is very collaborative," said Mayer, who is also a Northern Arizona University assistant research professor. "At the (Arizona) pavilion, people will come to our company and see us as part of something that is much larger."

Arizona has made a major push to **invest** in the biosciences by infusing tens of millions of dollars in new research labs at the state universities and in the private, non-

profit genomics research group, the Translational Genomics Research Institute. Still, an important barometer of the state's biotech success is the number and quality of startup companies that are spinning out of the universities, research institutes or the private sector.

Event showcases state

Arizona Department of Commerce is organizing the statewide effort and promoting the efforts of participating companies with the goal of raising the state's biotech profile.

Among the new companies that will share space at Arizona's conference pavilion this year will be SenesTech and a handful of Phoenix companies such as Provista Life Sciences, Mission3, InSys Therapeutics and Caris MPI (formerly Molecular Profiling Institute). Several other Arizona research entities, such as Mayo Clinic, TGen, Biodesign Institute and Bio5 will join the ranks of state and municipal economic development representatives.

State officials expect to pool more than

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\$100,000 in public and private funds to rent space at the convention and promote Arizona's research efforts. Similar efforts at past Bio conventions produced leads that resulted in relocations or expansions of such companies as Covance and InSys Therapeutics, said Jaye O'Donnell, senior director of marketing and business attraction for the state's department of commerce.

"This is one of our targeted industries that the state is focused on," O'Donnell said. "We are trying to attract the high-paying jobs from knowledge-based industries and the biosciences."

Industry analysts say the annual biotech event draws bio leaders across the globe and is an important way for states and regions to showcase their biotech achievements. It becomes an important tool for recruiting scientists, companies and investment to a state or region.

"If you aren't there, you sort of get lost in the dust in terms of branding and imaging," said Walt Plosila, a senior advisor at the Ohio-based Battelle Technology Partnership Practice and a consultant to the Flinn Foundation, which helped chart Arizona's biotech efforts.

Plosila said Arizona's new research labs and proximity to more established biotech corridors in California should capture the attention of small companies looking to relocate. These companies typically are more nimble and have more flexibility to move. Whether these companies actually move to a new city or town depends on such factors as workforce quality or availability of capital.

"(Companies) go to places where there are people like them," Plosila said.

Companies look to grow

Mayer believes that SenesTech in many ways represents the collaborative nature of Arizona's biotech industry.

The company was birthed on a technology from the labs of the University of Arizona and nurtured by scientists at NAU in Flagstaff.

The researchers have discovered a compound that hastens the aging process in rats and mice and other animals.

One form of the technology - called Mouseopause - has been licensed to Jackson Laboratory, which provides lab rats to researchers studying treatments for post-menopausal women.

SenesTech has secured \$3 million from private investors in Arizona. It is raising another \$10 million to expand the company and study how the technology can be used to reduce the crop-destroying rat populations in regions such as Indonesia or Java. SenesTech is exploring testing the ContraPest technology in rice-producing

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nations to see if it can effectively curtail rats that can consume or destroy half of an entire rice field.

Farmers now try to beat back the out-of-control field rats by using poison, which can be dangerous and potentially reach the food supply without proper safeguards.

Mayer and fellow NAU scientists Cheryl Dyer and Tim Vail say SenesTech's discovery is a safer, more effective alternative. And they believe the technology can be used to control other prolific animal populations, such as badgers, dogs or cats.

Mayer believes the company will meet other scientists and entrepreneurs at the Bio event that can help the Arizona company grow.

"When we first started at Bio, we were two PhD's with a cell phone," Mayer said. "We will get lots of new ideas this year. This technology can be expanded."

The other Arizona companies believe this week will be important for their bottom line.

"This is the biggest, most prestigious conference in biotech," said Caroline Hardy, director of marketing for Provista, a Phoenix company that sells a blood test that it says can help aid early detection of breast cancer.

Provista will attempt to market its test to pharmaceutical companies that may be interested in a diagnostic test to help select patients for clinical trials. The company soon expects to unveil a test that can identify Alzheimer's risk.

"This will give us more exposure to pharmaceutical companies and others wanting to license technology," Hardy said.

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