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State bioscience plans right on track, says CEO

BY RICK PLUMLEE
The Wichita Eagle

Tom Thornton is never bashful about where he thinks Kansas is going in the bioscience industry.

And the CEO of the Kansas Bioscience Authority showed that again in a speech at the annual Kansas Day of Innovation, held Thursday at the Wichita Marriott.

"Our goal is to position the state to be the undisputed leader in biosciences," he said.

The state is well on its way because two of the five recent biofuel grants from the U.S. Department of Energy included "significant" Kansas partners, he said.

One was for \$5 million that went to Georgia-based Agco and the other was for \$4.9 million that went to FDC Enterprises, which has its headquarters in Columbus, Ohio.

While Agco has operations in Hesston, both Agco and FDC Enterprises will use part of their grant money at the Abengoa Bioenergy cellulosic biorefinery in Hugoton.

Agco's plan is to compress biomass into large square bales for more economic shipping and use. FDC Enterprises expects to develop machines to handle biomass.

Construction of the Hugoton plant is expected to begin early next year and start operations in 2012.

Also part of the Kansas Day of Innovation was the sixth annual Great Plains Capital Conference.

At the conference, 11 Kansas technology companies had 15 minutes to present their business plans to investors. The presenters were chosen from among 32 applicants.

Kevin Carr, the interim CEO for Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation, said of the 45 companies that have made presentations at the previous five conferences, 30 reported receiving \$83 million from investors met at the conferences.

Of those 45 companies, 41 are still in business, Carr said.

The KBA and KTEC both invest in companies, including some that have presented plans at the conferences.

For the fiscal year that ended in June, KBA's seed investment in companies resulted in creating 1,100 new jobs, \$100 million in capital investment and brought in \$37 million in federal money for research and development, said Thornton, KBA chief executive.

The KBA invests in "game-changing projects," he said.

"Entrepreneurs are the real heroes of the day" for the Kansas economy, Thornton said.

At the same time, he said the KBA is "not an ATM machine. We scrutinize every investment we make. We expect a return on our investment."

He said the state economy has received \$5 for every \$1 dollar the KBA has invested.

The KBA was also instrumental in bringing the \$500 million National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility to Manhattan.

Thornton said landing the lab has "established Kansas as the undisputed international leader in animal health research."

After his talk, Thornton said he expects the House to follow the Senate's lead and vote in the next week or two to appropriate the \$36 million to begin construction on the lab.

"We're extremely optimistic," he said. "No one has raised an absolute no. Everyone agrees this is a critical investment."

He said political wrangling over the lab hasn't delayed the project. He said construction is scheduled to start next June as has always been planned.

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