
Biotechnology Association of the Spokane Region

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At least 23 Tri-Cities companies are doing business in the biotechnology or biomedical sectors. Dozens more organizations in the Mid-Columbia are engaged in medical education, health care and university biotech research. Now, they have a new resource.

The Biotechnology Association of the Spokane Region, or BASR, is fostering links among industry, research organizations and academia in the Inland Northwest region.

Biotechnology is the use of living organisms and biological research to develop medical, environmental and agricultural products. Biomedical firms develop and manufacture diagnostic and electronic devices or components for use by medical researchers and health care providers.

According to co-founder D. Patrick Jones, BASR was launched to strengthen and expand the Northwest biotech and biomedical industry on the East side of the Cascade Mountains - including Eastern Washington, Northern Idaho and Western Montana.

Jones, a Spokane businessman with a PhD in economics, started BASR in 1999 with other community leaders to help Spokane move into a more knowledge-based economy. "This geographic area has a strong hospital system and life sciences emphasis, but much of its biotech industry is still in its infancy compared with the Puget Sound area," said Jones.

BASR's mission, Jones said, is to promote outcome-based research, education and legislative representation as well as to increase professional and high-paying jobs in biotech. Ultimately, Jones hopes BASR will help transform the Inland Northwest economy from its traditional industrial base into a more competitive, high-tech marketplace.

Regional business and academic leaders are solidly behind the biotech push. Spokane developers hope to break ground next fall for a biotech and technology park on several hundred acres near the Spokane County Airport. The Spokane Journal of Business recently cited the park development and formation of the BASR as evidence that the regional biotech sector is moving from dream to reality.

Washington State University, the University of Idaho and the U.S. Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory are investing millions of dollars in new programs in genomics, proteomics, bioinformatics and health research. The BASR holds quarterly seminars and publishes a newsletter, the Biotech Fresh Sheet, for a growing distribution of recipients, now at 600. Recent seminar speakers traveling to Spokane from the Tri-Cities represented Richland biotech firm Virion, Inc. and Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. Virion's Michelle Inserra spoke about the company's clinical trials in support of a new wart treatment product.

Representatives from PNNL described user facilities, proteomics research, a new food science laboratory and other resources available to industry and universities. Speakers at past seminars have touched on issues such as the process of pharmaceutical development, protecting intellectual property and marketing life sciences products nationally. As involvement in BASR grows, Jones hopes to expand the seminars to other cities. A more comprehensive biotech forum is being planned for next year.

BASR strongly supports entrepreneurs and startup ventures. BASR member Joanna Ellington, for example, offers new life sciences businesses free mentoring and assistance as the biomedical development coordinator at Washington State University's Spokane campus. Ellington is a professor in WSU's pharmacy department and founder of Advanced Reproductive Technologies, a Spokane startup company. Last fall, Ellington helped several companies prepare grant applications to the Washington Technology Center for biomedical research and product development. Two companies, partnering with universities, received a total of \$187,000 as a result.

The non-profit BASR maintains close ties with the well-established Washington Biotechnology and Biomedical Association. Jones is working with the state organization to offer improved insurance benefits and group equipment purchasing for regional employers.

Current BASR members include both established and emerging firms such as Hollister-Stier Laboratories, Biomedex Inc. and Biogenetic Ventures as well as universities, laboratories, institutes, suppliers, economic development organizations and investors.

"Many of these organizations are competitors in other realms, so I have been particularly impressed with their cooperation in BASR," Jones said. "I think they realize that we must work together if biotechnology is to become a viable growth area in our region," he said.

BASR annual membership dues are \$35 for students, \$75 for academics/researchers and \$500 for companies. For an application, or for other information about BASR, contact Patrick Jones at jones@hilltop@aol.com.