
Hanford entrepreneurial leave programs let entrepreneurs try their wings

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Programs at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory and Project Hanford Management Contract companies are helping "seed" startup companies in the Tri-Cities and surrounding counties in Washington and Oregon. Pacific Northwest's Entrepreneurial Program began two years ago as a leave of absence for the lab's staff, designed to give them legal access (such as a license) to a particular lab technology and the opportunity to commercialize it without resigning from the company.

This successful program has been expanded, and new doors to entrepreneurial opportunity are being opened for the community. For example, now, entrepreneurs don't have to be laboratory employees to qualify for assistance.

According to Marv Clement, who manages PNNL's Entrepreneurial Program, "We 'seed' new companies in the community so they can get off to a good start, grow their businesses and add to the community's employment base and product diversity."

Support for the lab's assistance to new companies has two Department of Energy sources. The Energy Research Laboratory Technology Research Program supports multidisciplinary research partnerships to investigate challenging scientific problems whose solutions have promising commercial potential. The Office of Worker and Community Transition 3161 Program is designed to help lessen negative economic impacts of downsizing at former defense production facilities.

The program's success is based on a combination of research and development capabilities and links to a community-wide network of business development organizations. Qualifying entrepreneurs who wish to start up local technology-based businesses may receive access to Pacific Northwest technology and facilities as well as guidance in obtaining market assessments and preparing business plans.

Entrepreneurs also may receive help in negotiating equipment loans and identifying very early stage financing. They are eligible for licenses to laboratory technologies--many at low cost.

Technical assistance is available for developing technologies or enhancing product features.

The 18 new companies opening their doors since the lab's Entrepreneurial Program began in 1995 are diverse in scope and type of assistance received. One such enterprise is Range of Motion Therapeutic. From its Kennewick office, ROM designs and manufactures therapeutic exercise equipment for patients suffering from strokes and head injuries. In addition to granting entrepreneurial leave to ROM's vice president, Sallie Ortiz, the lab helped launch the firm through a combination of technical and marketing assistance.

Pacific Northwest's program also helps entrepreneurs who invent technologies outside the lab. For example, Valley Vine Machinery Company has developed a new tractor-mounted mechanical grape pruner. The lab provided technical assistance, public relations support, and market assessments for the new business, which is in Prosser.

Pacific Northwest's successful program has served as a model for a new Hanford program in which PHMC employees also can start a new business while maintaining their health coverage for up to two years at the same group rate.

According to Dan Carlson, Fluor Daniel Hanford's Director of Economic Transition, the program "helps alleviate one of the major cost burdens normally incurred by folks who decide to set out on their own." He added, "DOE approval of this program has created a win-win situation for employees, the companies, the Hanford Site and the community by encouraging the creation of new non-0Hanford enterprise."

One new firm, MUNDO Communications, has two employees on entrepreneurial leave, one from Pacific Northwest and one from MACTEC, a PHMC contractor. MUNDO sells prepaid phone cards. New companies from either program can take advantage of a community network that includes Washington State University-Tri-Cities Business LINKS program, which provides business tools to assist residents in starting and developing local businesses. Business LINKS includes training, market assessments and interns for local businesses.

Organizations such as the Tri-Cities Enterprise Association and the Tri-Cities ports offer incubator space and other entrepreneurial support services. For more information, call 375-2789 or check the Internet at <http://www.pnl.gov/edo>.