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44 biotech companies located in Alachua Co.

By **MARINA BLOMBERG** Sun staff writer

Area biotech at a glance:

Forty-four life sciences, biotech and medical device companies are located in Alachua County. Most are spun off from University of Florida research.

- These companies **employ more than 1,000 people**; the largest employs 450.
- In the past fiscal year, there has been **\$50 million equity investment** in firms at the Sid Martin Biotechnology Development incubator, 62 percent more than during the first 10 years of its existence.
- **Four of these companies are publicly traded:** Regeneration Technologies Inc. (RTIX). Exactech (EXAC), Oragenics (ONI) and MRI Devices/Invivo (which has recently been acquired by Royal Philips Electronics - NYSE: PHG, AEX: PHI)
- Another **32,000-square-foot building is under construction** at Progress Corporate Park, with verbal commitments already received for the majority of the space.

Training opportunities

While other areas of Florida might be lacking in training in this emerging field, the North Central Florida area is rich in opportunities for young people - or those wishing to switch careers -to become proficient in the life sciences fields. Among those are:

- **UF's Interdisciplinary Center for Biotechnology Research**, which includes the Center of Excellence for Regeneration Health Biotechnology, which has hosted hundreds of workshops, courses and seminars since 1989. **UF's Center for Precollegiate Education and Training**, which instructs not only middle and high school students laboratory techniques, but their instructors as well.
- **Santa Fe Community College's Biotechnology Laboratory Technology Program**, begun in 2000, with 100 percent of its graduates either being immediately employed or going on to higher degree. The small program is growing; there are 55 students involved now.
- **Biotechnology Education Training Council**, a consortium of SFCC and community colleges in Jacksonville and Indian River and UF's Center of Excellence that is developing a constantly updated curriculum to be used by industry to train new and current workers.

While big research park names like Scripps, Torrey Pines and the Burnham Institute are moving into South and Central Florida, Alachua's Progress Corporate Park is holding its own when it comes to attracting life sciences, research and medical device companies.

The Gainesville Technology Enterprise Center on Hawthorne Road is likewise filled to the brim, with two new companies soon to join the existing 10 and only one space open. Not all startup companies there are in biotechnology.

Both Progress and GTEC are incubators for startup and spin-off companies.

Since the 204-acre Progress Park opened in 1988, there have been dozens of biotech and research companies moving through the facilities. Some stay; some are acquired by larger firms. Currently there are more than 30 in the complex off U.S. 441 just south of downtown Alachua.

Companies range from 500-square-foot labs with one person to 110,000 square feet employing 450. The park is zoned for other businesses, including light industrial, general office, distribution, medical, retail and hotel use.

While there may be a question if the South Florida and Orlando sites are prepared -or even suitable - for such high-tech businesses because of a weak education system and unrealistic expectations, those involved with the local industry say Alachua County is growing along with it.

Patti Breedlove, assistant director and manager of the 11-year-old Sid Martin Biotechnology Development Incubator (BDI) in Progress Park - which she calls the "hub" of the park - said for the last three years the 40,000-square-foot building is staying pretty full. "It's a sign of the sector growing."

All the firms there must have some connection to the University of Florida, and the majority are operating with technology licensed by UF. But outsiders do find it, and manage to get in.

St. Charles Pharmaceuticals operated in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina closed it down. "After a search around the entire Southeast, (the owner) said this was the best location she could find. She established a relationship with some researchers at UF and is now a tenant," Breedlove said.

GTEC's director Booker Schmidt attends many business and entrepreneur meetings and conferences, keeping an eye on prospective tenants. "Some find us. But Booker's always looking for people. And while we are not a part of UF, we keep a close contact with them," said communications manager Donna Foster. "We look for people who are a step beyond (working from) the garage."

Most biotechnology firms stay in their incubator six years. Since BDI opened, there have been 34 tenants. "Biotech has a long childhood. Most succeed but some fail. It's the same for greeting card companies as it is life sciences firms," Breedlove said.

There are currently 11 tenants at BDI being given their initial boost to independence by using the incubator's \$1 million in shared equipment and business facilities, support services such as liquid nitrogen and hazardous waste pickup, and business development services and resources.

In addition there are several associate members - some BDI graduates who remained in Progress Park - who, for a fee, can use the \$1 million in equipment or other amenities offered the startups.

At last count there were 44 life sciences, medical device and biotech companies in Alachua County, Breedlove said. These businesses combined employ more than 1,000 employees. The three largest are Regeneration Technologies Inc., which employs about 450 people; Tutogen Medical, which moved its headquarters here from up North, with about 200; and MRI Devices/Invivo (Intermagnetics) in Gainesville, which was recently acquired by Royal Philips Electronics, with more than 200; Exactech has 220.

Marina Blomberg can be reached at (352) 374-5025 or blombem@gvillesun.com