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INSIDE TECHNOLOGY

## Biotech show could bring Chicago bonanza

By Jon Van

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When it lands in Chicago next week the world's biggest biotech trade show will bring together a disparate group of entrepreneurs, scientists, executives and politicians to celebrate life sciences.

One might wonder what in the world folks who devise new kinds of seed corn have in common with big pharmaceutical houses looking for the next blockbuster disease treatment. Oddly enough, it's a lot.

Alejandro Aruffo, vice president for the Abbott Bioresearch Center in North Chicago, said that for years scientists had a dogmatic view about the relationships between DNA and RNA genetic materials and the proteins they express. That view regarded much of the genetic materials as inactive junk.

But a plant biologist working to produce a flower that would have a deeper shade of purple discovered that some supposedly inert RNA actually played a regulatory role. That discovery reverberated across the entire world of life sciences.

"These things are intimately connected," said Aruffo. "I spend a lot of time looking at disease. I look for defective proteins. Now, I also look for controlling RNA."

At BIO2006, Aruffo and thousands of others will wander the exhibit floors of McCormick Place, looking at the agricultural displays along with the health-care presentations.

James Tyree, president of Abbott Nutrition International, said Abbott and other large companies joined with the smaller start-up biotech firms in Illinois to attract BIO2006 to Chicago in order to underscore the region's rich and diverse life sciences industries.

"The Midwest hasn't gotten the attention we deserve," said Tyree. "Bringing BIO2006 to Chicago should change that."

Because the trade show attracts thousands of potential investors, hosting the event can mean as much as \$100 million of investment flowing into the area over the two to four years following the event, Tyree said.

Small companies like Chromatin, which is developing a platform to enhance the ability of seed companies to manipulate genetic traits, can contact dozens of people in the space of a few days, said Jon Leafstedt, Chromatin's chief executive.

"We can see a lot of people in a short time," said Leafstedt. "Networking is really important to us."

Organizing to host BIO2006 has brought many people together who otherwise would not have met each other, he said.

After the show leaves, Illinois BIO, the state trade group, will work to assure that the connectivity among people from large firms, small start-ups and academic researchers continues.

"Our goal is to get Chicago into the rotation so that BIO brings its meeting here regularly," Tyree said.

Robot, phone home: Even robots can profit from cell phone technology, it seems, and a Chicago-based firm, nPhase LLC, is arranging their connections.

The Swedish firm ABB Robotics selected nPhase to provide connections using cell phone carriers to monitor hundreds of industrial robots that it regularly services.

"Often, ABB will hear from a customer only when a robot has failed and the assembly line is shut down," said Steve Pazol, nPhase's chief. "By networking the robots, ABB can monitor all aspects of their operation and make repairs and adjustments, often by phone.

"They can do everything remotely except actually touch the robot."

While warning of potential trouble and preventive maintenance is the motivation for networking robots, Pazol said, once a company starts getting useful information it begins to discover new ways to use it. Machine-to-machine networking, or M2M, is nPhase's specialty.

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