

AgraQuest cuts ribbon, opening new lab space

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By: Jeff Hudson, Davis Enterprise

AgraQuest — the South Davis-based company that specializes in biopesticides — held a ribbon-cutting ceremony Thursday that officially opened 2,880 square feet of new lab space adjacent to the existing office on Drew Avenue.

The added lab space is already being used for new product development, and will host 10 or more process development scientists who are working on the company's next generation of products.

The addition includes two new fermentation labs equipped with 13 bioreactors, doubling AgraQuest's fermentation capacity for product development. The addition also includes a new processing laboratory equipped with a particle analyzer, spray dryer, high shear mixer and wet mill.

Marcus Meadows-Smith, AgraQuest CEO, told an audience of local elected officials, businessmen and educators that AgraQuest is developing biopesticides with the goal of increasing agricultural yields while reducing the use of conventional pesticides and the impact of their residues, resulting in higher food quality and longer shelf life.

He said the company is focusing on products that “affect only the target pest, are effective in small quantities, and help the crop yield to remain high” while leaving “no regulated pesticide residues” on food.

Most of the company's products — both those that are currently available, and those that are in development — are made using bacteria in a fermentation process. Meadows-Smith drew a comparison to the processes that are used in making yogurt or beer.

Meadows-Smith said AgraQuest is anticipating an increasing demand for food as the world's population ramps up to an expected 9 billion people by the year 2050. That should create a growing market for the company's products.

He added that the company's products are being marketed worldwide, not just in the United States. The company has fungicides

and insecticides registered in 27 countries (in Europe, the Americas and Asia), including brand names like Serenade, Sonata, Requiem, Ballad Plus and Serenade Soil.

Some of these products are available to consumers through home and garden retailers. In August, AgraQuest rolled out a new product called Serenade Garden Disease Control Ready to Spray, which can be applied with a hose-end sprayer and used on a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, flowers and grass.

Jon Margoles, senior vice president of research and development, said AgraQuest has added nearly 50 jobs in the past two years. The company now has about 230 employees worldwide, including roughly 100 at a manufacturing facility in Mexico. AgraQuest has about 55 scientists working in research and development.

The company was founded in Davis in 1995.

Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor described AgraQuest as “a perfect fit for Davis ... we want you to stay here.” Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, who chairs the Assembly Select Committee on Sustainable and Organic Agriculture, invited Meadows-Smith make a presentation at one of the committee’s upcoming meetings.

Davis Mayor Pro Tem Rochelle Swanson and Don Palm, dean of the Sacramento City College Davis Center, were among the others attending, along with representatives of state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, and Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena.

During a tour of his lab, senior scientist Tad Smith described how AgraQuest “uses bacteria to produce natural compounds that control pests,” and displayed plants that had been treated with AgraQuest products to control wheat leaf rust, barley powder mildew, tomato late blight and botrytis gray mold.

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