

May 18, 2009

University researchers seek slice of stimulus

By ERIN JORDAN
ejordan@dmreg.com

Iowa's public universities have already applied for more than \$250 million in research grants through the federal economic stimulus package, which includes about \$13 billion for research.

University officials say the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has the potential to jump-start research that had stalled because of flat federal funding in past years. But the stimulus money runs out in two years, which puts researchers on tight deadlines for getting results.

"We're kind of living for today, I guess," said Mark Ackermann, a professor of veterinary pathology at Iowa State University. "We'll try our hardest to get really good data and hope it positions us well for traditional funding (at the end of two years)."

Ackermann's application is one of more than 400 grant proposals submitted by researchers at Iowa's public universities. The University of Iowa has the most, with 338 through May 13. ISU filed 67 applications through April 30, and the University of Northern Iowa had eight applications through April 30.

Because the research funding is billed as an economic boost, researchers say they would use the money to hire new staff, pay graduate students and support local economies with equipment and animal purchases. Research can also benefit the state through patent royalties and spin-off companies that hire Iowans and pay taxes.

Most of the U of I and ISU grant requests are for the National Institutes of Health, which has received about \$8.2 billion as part of February's \$787 billion stimulus bill.

The NIH is struggling to keep up with more than 20,000 applications that have come in so far for a share of \$2 billion allocated for research, construction and equipment through the Challenge Grant program, USA Today reported last week.

"No matter how you stretch it, a number of projects won't get funded," said Philip Wertz, a U of I dentistry professor who is seeking \$415,000 to develop an oral rinse with lipids that would prevent infections.

The NIH is asking researchers like Wertz to do peer reviews on applications, he said. Wertz questions whether the NIH will be able to distribute the money fairly by the end of year, which was the federal agency's goal.

The high number of applications indicates excitement among academics across the country.

"I'm pretty psyched about it," said Gary Christensen, a U of I engineering professor.

He is seeking \$1 million to develop a database for comparing tumor tracking systems, which determine where a tumor is in the body so radiation can be more targeted.

ISU's Ackermann has applied for \$1 million to use sheep as models to study how moderate alcohol consumption by mothers may affect babies' lung development. His team would give ewes moderate amounts of alcohol through tubes into their stomachs and see whether their lambs have lungs with a greater susceptibility to respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV.

RSV can lead to pneumonia and other problems for premature babies. Ackermann hopes that by using sheep, which have lung development and anatomy similar to humans, scientists can find ways to better protect infants from the virus.

The Iowa Math and Science Education Partnership at UNI is seeking nearly \$900,000 from the National Science Foundation's Robert Noyce Scholarship grant program, which received an extra \$60 million from the stimulus bill.

The money would provide scholarships for science, technology, engineering or math majors for high-need schools in Iowa, said Christy Twait, assistant provost for sponsored programs at UNI.

Mike Tramontina, director of the Iowa Department of Economic Development, said he supports the universities' applications for federal research funding and hopes some of those projects will be commercialized so Iowans will feel the economic benefits.

"The translation to company creation is more tenuous than you might think," Tramontina said.

Additional Facts

Applications by university

Here's a breakdown of the research grant applications from Iowa's public universities. Scientists are seeking a share of the \$13 billion allocated for research in the federal economic stimulus bill.

University of Iowa: 338 applications through May 13 for \$209 million

Iowa State University: 67 applications through April 30 for \$41 million

University of Northern Iowa: 8 applications through April 30 for \$3.7 million
