

Biotech firms could be boon to economy; Expert challenges New Brunswick to play larger role

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Byline: dwayne tingley times & transcript staff

Biotechnology is a multi-billion-dollar industry in North America and Prince Edward Island has figured out how to get a piece of the action a lot faster than New Brunswick, an expert in the field said yesterday.

However, Martin LeBlanc also said opportunities still exist and that New Brunswick can still find its place in the industry.

LeBlanc, a 42-year-old Dieppe native who is president of his third Montreal-based biotech venture, made his comments during an elaborate presentation to the Moncton Rotary Club yesterday at the Delta Beauséjour.

Biotech companies help people live longer and healthier lives. They also possess an incredible amount of economic potential for regions that house them, said LeBlanc, who also sits on the board of directors for the Atlantic Cancer Research Institute in Moncton.

North America is home to 60 per cent of the biotech research companies in the world. In Canada alone, the field spends \$1.7 billion annually in research and development and has 13,500 employees.

P.E.I.'s share of the market is modest, but it still exceeds New Brunswick. There are 22 biotech research companies on the Island and they have \$60 million in revenues and 650 full-time employees. They also have eight research centres.

In a brief interview after his address, LeBlanc said P.E.I.'s commitment to biotechnology probably emerged from their agricultural and veterinary research expertise.

"They saw a market developing and they decided to focus on it," LeBlanc said. "It's a matter of focusing on it for a number of years. Projects like these don't just happen over night.

"It may be small, but it shows what can be done with the proper support and the proper focus."

The Université de Moncton graduate and Rhodes Scholar encouraged New Brunswick to find its own "niche" within the biotechnology sector and develop it in order to advance the study of human health and to be part of a burgeoning market.

New Brunswick should realize large pharmaceutical companies are looking elsewhere for much of their research and development work, he said.

"It can take 12 or 15 years to take a new pharmaceutical from discovery to getting it into the hands of consumers," LeBlanc said.

Governments are also looking to privatize much of the research work done in hospital learning centres so the possibilities for companies doing similar work in New Brunswick exist.

The Atlantic Cancer Research Institute is just one example of a centre capable of doing more work and LeBlanc encouraged governments and the public to support it.

N.B. needs to ignite biotech boom; R&D P.E.I.'s bioscience sector generating revenues totalling \$60M

New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

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Byline: Ben Shingler Telegraph-Journal

New Brunswick needs to improve collaboration between the public and private sectors and a boost in government funding to grab a greater share of the growing biotechnology industry, says an industry expert.

Martin LeBlanc, a Dieppe-born scientist and entrepreneur who now heads up a biotechnology company in Montreal, said that by investing in research and development the province will attract biotechnology companies to the region.

"I think the first step is to have more basic research funded," said Leblanc, "so that there then becomes a cluster of companies that does applied forms of the research."

At a rotary luncheon in Moncton Monday afternoon, LeBlanc stressed the increasing importance of growing the knowledge-based economy in New Brunswick, and outlined the steps necessary to make it happen.

LeBlanc would know: A graduate of l'Université de Moncton, the 42-year-old is a former Oxford University Rhodes Scholar and a successful entrepreneur who has already started up three successful biotechnology companies.

LeBlanc said there is potential in particular to attract biotechnology companies to Moncton specializing in the health sector, which involves using micro-organisms to develop new medicines and health products.

The city already boasts the Atlantic Canada Research Institute (ACRI), the only hospital-based medical research center in the province and the largest cancer research centre in Atlantic Canada. LeBlanc said the institute could be used to help attract smaller private-sector research companies to the city.

Even though he works in Montreal, LeBlanc said the growing sector is not reserved for big cities, citing recent successes in Prince Edward Island as an example.

Using a slide show, LeBlanc demonstrated to the audience how 22 bioscience companies have set up in the tiny province, generating revenues totalling \$60 million. P.E.I.'s bioscience sector now has 650 full and part-time employees, with about 400 in private sector companies and 250 in public sector academic, research and government organizations.

LeBlanc made a convincing case that New Brunswick - and the rest Atlantic Canada - are not receiving their fair share of federal funding to encourage research and development in health sciences and technology.

In 2006, Atlantic Canada received only \$20 million of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research \$750 million annual budget, or about three per cent of total funding.

With eight per cent of the country's population, Atlantic Canada's per capita share would amount to about \$60 million per year.

Funding at the provincial level in New Brunswick is also well-behind its provincial counterparts, LeBlanc said.

In Quebec, the provincial government accounts for between 30 and 40 per cent of funding for some of the major research institutes.

Yet the Atlantic Canada Research Institute cannot count on guaranteed annual funding from either government, said LeBlanc, who is on the board of directors.

It relies on one-time grants from organizations such as the federally-funded Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the provincially-funded New Brunswick Innovation Foundation.

LeBlanc said the institute's heavy reliance on donations, which account for 35 per cent of its total funding, makes it difficult to operate in the long run, and to lure researchers here.

"You need to be able to tell the researcher, I can pay your annual salary before they come and set up here," he said.

LeBlanc said "there needs to be a structural solution" involving collaboration between government, universities and other public organizations that would give research institutes in the province a reliable source of funding from year to year and improved infrastructure.

Still, LeBlanc said there are positive signs in New Brunswick, with the growth of the Atlantic Canada Research Institute and biotechnology companies such as Bio Prospecting NB Inc. taking off.

If the trend continues, the New Brunswick native is not ruling out a move back to his home province.

"Until recently, it was an impossible move to conceive of. But things are improving," he said. "I already have a cottage here so you never know."