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Today's Local Business

Grain centre's synergy touted

Would unite best talent under one huge roof

By: Larry Kusch

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A new cereal grains research centre touted for U of M's Smartpark would become a magnet for the best give Canadian farmers a competitive edge in the global marketplace and bring prestige to the city and t backers say.

The unique facility -- which would cost up to \$150 million and house up to 500 scientists and support s size of four large Canadian Tire stores -- was given a conditional go-ahead from Ottawa on Friday.

It would combine the talents of six now-scattered Winnipeg-based groups and agencies and include pla development and quality control personnel plus technical experts who can show domestic and internati to use Canadian grain in their processing plants.

"It would put Winnipeg and Manitoba on an international scale for research in the grain crops area," sai grain storage expert and associate vice-president of research at the University of Manitoba, one of six p venture.

The six Winnipeg institutions and agencies, which include the federal government's Cereal Research C campus, have been collaborating for years.

But putting them under one roof will spur that co-operation, cut duplication and better focus scientists t crops and products that will put more money in farmers' pockets, proponents say.

The impetus for the new centre of excellence -- formally called the Canadian Cereal Research and Inno comes from the fact that some key institutions are showing their age and need to be replaced.

The Ag Canada Cereal Research Centre, which was built in the late 1950s primarily to produce rust-res varieties, is badly in need of replacement or a major retrofit.

"It has reached the end of its useful life," said Stephen Morgan-Jones, director general of sustainable pr with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Grain Commission's laboratory, which occupies the top four floors of a high- is becoming cramped.

That got these and several other groups thinking that the opportunity was right for a world-class facility encompass all of them.

"Everybody is very excited about the possibilities that could come out of this initiative by the governm Earl Geddes, a senior official with the Canadian Wheat Board, adding that placing scientists and suppo

will likely save taxpayers money.

Geddes said the wheat board's role will be to help ensure that research conducted at the new facility is based on market demands. He noted that farmers, through the CWB and grain marketing checkoffs, fund some of the research. Participating groups carry out, along with Ottawa and private industry.

"They (farmers) can have confidence that the money they're putting into (the facility)... has a market demand," Geddes said.

Even organizations that are not directly behind the project are enthusiastic about its potential for the grain industry and mention a boost to Winnipeg's and Manitoba's profile.

"It will be completely unique, not only in Canada, but worldwide," said Peter Jones, director of the Richardson Centre for Functional Foods and Nutraceuticals, which would be a neighbour of the new lab if it winds up at Smartpark.

"It's absolutely outstanding. You can use any superlative you want, and I think you're underestimating the value of contributing to the agriculture, food, health cluster here," said Jones, who calls it a project comparable in scale to the National Microbiology Laboratory on Arlington Street.

He also sees tremendous opportunities for collaboration between the Richardson centre, which includes support staff, and the new grain centre of excellence.

Like the human and animal disease lab in the north part of Winnipeg, the cereal grain facility could find itself in the forefront of combatting looming and potentially devastating crop diseases.

For instance, a new strain of plant rust, known as Uganda 99, has moved from East Africa across the Atlantic to Iran, said Ag Canada's Morgan-Jones. Researchers have found few cereal grain varieties resistant to it, and there is a risk that it will eventually find its way here.

"Having the expertise to be able to address these emerging threats at an early stage, which this new centre can do... will be of immense importance to the long-term future and prosperity of the Canadian wheat industry," Jones said. Jean-Marc Ruest, a spokesman for James Richardson International, said he can see the new centre attracting private companies to Smartpark. Monsanto Canada Ltd., for instance, already has its corporate head office in Smartpark.

"I think the creation of that type of centre and that type of atmosphere would make a compelling case for biotech companies to want to set up shop in that very same area," Ruest said.

larry.kusch@freepress.mb.ca \$150-million facility

Grain industry centre of excellence:

What's being proposed? A grain research, product-testing and marketing facility that would cost as much as \$150 million, employ up to 500 people and take up 28,000 square metres of space. It would likely be located at the University of Manitoba.

Where is it at? The project has received an initial OK by the federal government. Industry stakeholders are working on a formal business plan. Final federal approval could come late this year or early next year.

What does it mean for the grain industry? Quicker development of new crop varieties, less costly duplication of equipment and staff, more opportunities for market development and perhaps new services, such as export market research.

When will it open? Once the centre is formally approved, it could take three to five years for the project.

Here are the players:

Cereal Research Centre -- Develops many of Canada's wheat and oat varieties. The Ag Canada facility, M campus, is a half-century old and needs replacement. It has 25 scientists and 160 permanent staff, plus employees.

University of Manitoba -- Some 20 to 30 agriculture faculty are involved in some form of grain research. They would share equipment and technical personnel with Cereal Research Centre staff and be able to collaborate with the CRC than it does now. Its graduate students are expected to greatly benefit from all the expertise of the centre.

Canadian Grain Commission -- This federal grain research and regulatory body would relocate about 10 support staff from downtown Winnipeg to the new centre. Its staff would benefit from sharing equipment and proximity to other grain researchers.

Canadian International Grains Institute -- This non-profit market development organization has educated individuals from 110 countries since 1972 on the technical use of Canadian crops. It would also move to the new centre and employs about 45 staff.

Canadian Malting Barley Technical Centre -- Gives technical assistance to domestic and export custom malters. Located downtown in the Grain Commission Building.

Canadian Wheat Board -- The large Prairie wheat and barley marketer is also a partner in the project, but will move only about 10 technical staff to the new location.

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