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Bio Nebraska building momentum for the state's bio sciences sector

by Becky McCarville

While Bio Nebraska's Executive Director Rob Owen is new to his current role, he isn't new to the bio/life sciences sector in Nebraska. As former board chairman for Bio Nebraska, previous in-house counsel for Streck and of counsel at Pontiac, Michigan-based The Dobrusin Law Firm, Streck's outside intellectual property law firm, he's well-versed in Bio Nebraska's mission to promote the state's biotech industry and is focused on listening to what the 80-plus member companies want.

Established in 2005, the organization is building momentum based on its "three pillars," formulated about eight years ago by former Executive Director Phil Kozera (who left Bio Nebraska for MatMaCorp this past Fall) and Owen, when he was board chairman.

"Through some meetings with stakeholders we tried to find out — what can Bio Nebraska offer its members and what do our members want, most importantly," Owen said, adding that with less than two full-time employees, the organization is limited in what it can offer. Assistant Director Sasha Forsen was hired part-time last April.

The organization's three pillars include advocating for its members through issue advocacy, coordinating networking events and being a "go-to" resource in and out of the state, helping make connections.

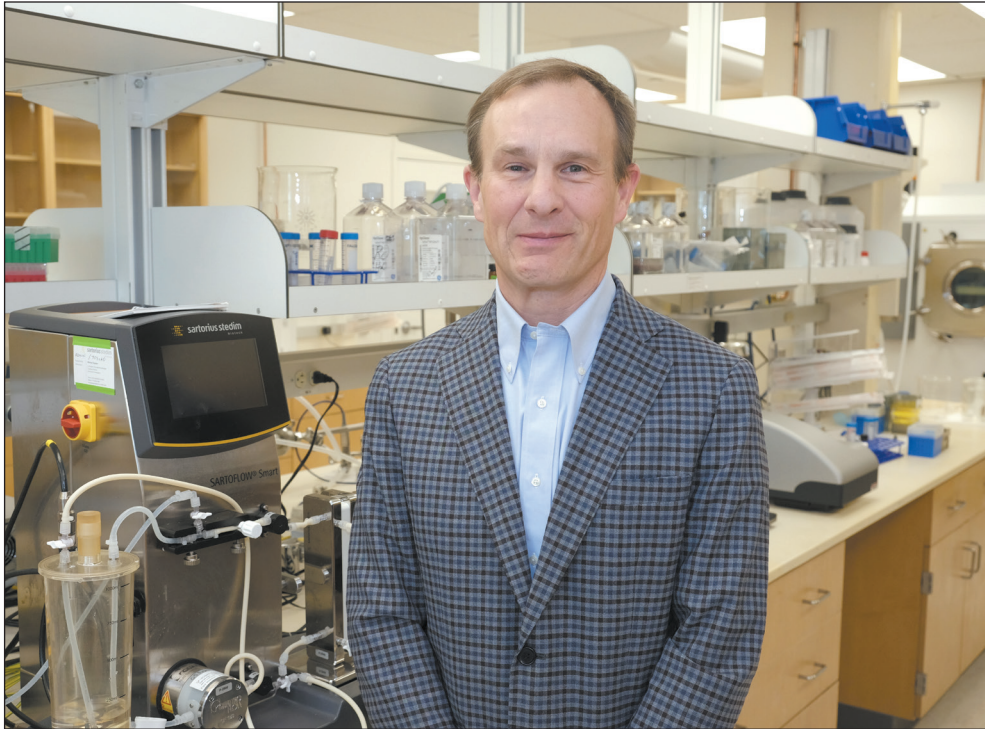
"As a result of that, we got our [financial] footings — we flipped the model from being 75% funded out of the university and now we're 75% industry/private sector versus university," he said.

Revenue streams from membership dues, corporate sponsorships and a portion from a lab equipment purchase program for members.

"As a result of getting our footings and knowing what we could offer and what our members wanted, we've figured out that we can now be proactive in some areas [like the] women in STEM initiative that we started about three years ago," he said.

This initiative has grown from a luncheon that included women from the STEM sector (not just bio) three years ago to now, "an overwhelming response" from members who want networking opportunities with other women, mentorship and professional growth opportunities.

In October, a women in STEM luncheon drew over 120 attendees with speakers Shonna Dorsey, senior business systems consultant at Mutual of Omaha, and Nancy Williams, co-



Executive Director Rob Owen ... Promoting the bio/life sciences sector in Nebraska with networking events, issue advocacy and making connections.

founder and president and CEO of No More Empty Pots. On January 23, 2020, Bio Nebraska has partnered with ICAN for a workshop on emotional intelligence for women in STEM.

Other member events are held throughout the year, such as the popular Bio and Beers.

Owen said that since Bio Nebraska is a smaller organization, it's focusing on supporting women in STEM, not necessarily growing or raising STEM awareness.

"We are responding to what women in STEM are looking for that maybe they're not getting from their employer," he said, adding that employers are equally positive because it supports women in ways employers might not be able to.

"It's a win for all."

With the state's life sciences companies ranging from pharma/clinical trials to animal health to industrial biotech to biofuels, Owen said he might be talking with ProTransit Nanotherapy, an Omaha-based startup biotech company one day and an industrial biotech company the next. The majority of its members are in and around Omaha and Lincoln.

Lobbying efforts spurring economic development

For Gary Madsen, Ph.D., co-founder, president and CEO of ProTransit Nanotherapy, networking, camaraderie and Bio Nebraska's

lobbying efforts are some of the tangible benefits of membership.

In fact, he said that Laura Weber, Ph.D., product development scientist at ProTransit Nanotherapy, most likely would have moved out of state after graduating with her doctorate degree in nanomedicine from the University of Nebraska Medical Center's pharmacy school if she hadn't known about some of the opportunities available in Nebraska.

Madsen said that nanomedicine is a big area of research on campus. The university upgraded its nanomedicine lab space about a year ago.

"There have been at least three others we've hired right out of school," he said. "[Bio Ne-

braska] really fosters that whole infrastructure of biotechnology."

Madsen, who was hired as entrepreneur in residence by UNeMed in 2012 and moved to Nebraska from Madison, Wisconsin, said he can speak to the power of a strong biotech trade association after witnessing successes in Wisconsin.

"Out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, they've sprouted hundreds of biotech companies — it's just incredible," he said. "They've got a lot of funding there and a lot of people who will invest in bio tech. And, they've had several big buyouts of companies."

Bio Nebraska has grown since Madsen first came to Nebraska.

"I think the organization has really accomplished a lot both in terms of membership, bringing people together — the camaraderie, if you will — getting the government attention,

some of the lobbying things that have been going on," he said. "There have been a lot of big steps over that time."

ProTransit Nanotherapy, which has been developing a skincare lotion that prevents skin cancer, is scaling up its patented nanoparticle production in lab space it rents at UNMC and has been a beneficiary of state grants for Phase 0, Phase 1 and Phase 2 of its research.

The nanoparticles developed by ProTransit Nanotherapy deliver high-powered antioxidant enzymes that can prevent UV skin damage that leads to photoaging and skin cancer, among other potential applications.

The company is currently working on submitting three more grants to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) this month — one for the reduction of hypertension, one for treatment of traumatic brain injury and the third for its product to prevent skin cancer.

The issue advocacy work by Bio Nebraska draws lawmakers' attention to Nebraska's biotech sector.

The biggest "win" over the years was the passage of LB641 — the Bio Sciences Innovation Fund — that provides targeted investment and resources in bio science startups. Startup companies can apply for grants — funding "that didn't exist before," Owen said.

The biggest topic coming up this year in the legislative session, he said, is the industry-wide Nebraska Advantage Act, a tax incentive that is expiring. The legislature started working on a replacement bill last year, but it was held up by a property tax issue.

Bio Nebraska wants to ensure that the state's biotech sector, along with other industries, is eligible for tax incentives for capital investments, even if it only creates five or six high growth, high paying jobs.

"If Nebraska's going to have this program, let's make sure that all industries are eligible for



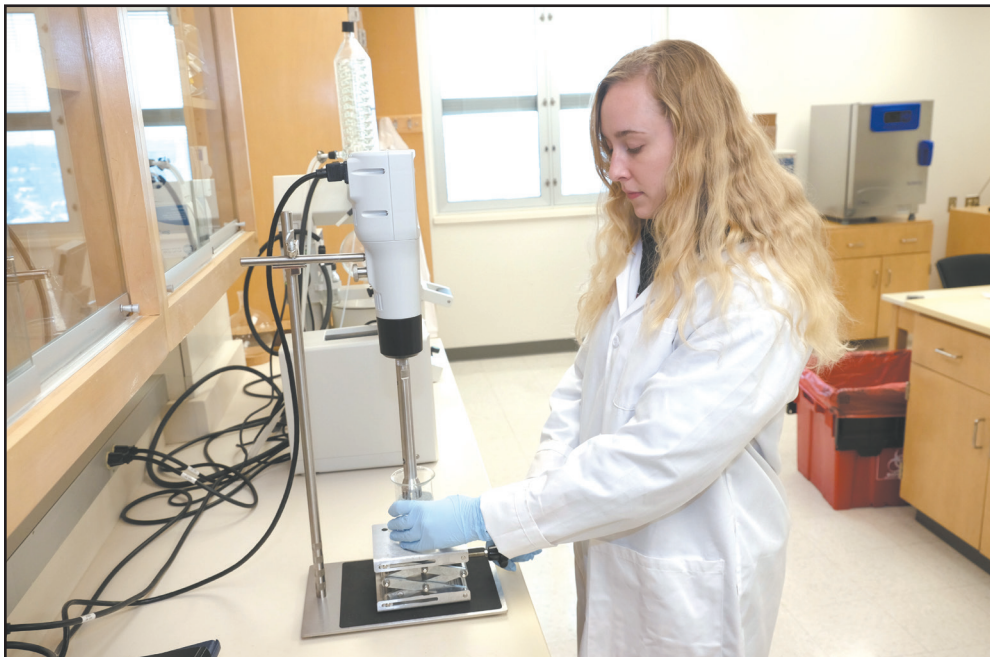
Gary Madsen, Ph.D., co-founder, president and CEO of ProTransit Nanotherapy, a startup company developing its patented nanoparticles that deliver high-powered antioxidant enzymes that can prevent UV damage and skin cancer, among other potential applications.

and especially in an industry that's showing high paying jobs," he said.

Bio Nebraska's goals are to reach over \$300,000 in revenue, which would allow it to hire a second full-time employee. Last year, revenue was about \$260,000.

"We've had a lot of good traction over the past five to six years — we want to keep building that because again, I think our big focus is to promote, grow and support the bio industry sector in Nebraska, and it needs that," he said.

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ProTransit Nanotherapy's Product Development Scientist Laura Weber, Ph.D., obtained her doctorate degree in nanomedicine at UNMC's College of Pharmacy and is now helping scale up ProTransit's nanoparticles.

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Physicians Thrive

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