



Green efforts thriving in Silicon Valley

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By David Louie

PALO ALTO, CA (KGO) -- Much of the innovative work going on in Silicon Valley's biotech industry is focused on new drugs. However, biotech research is also making important advances in many other aspects of our lives.

Biotech solutions already are used to soften denim and give jeans a worn look. That is just one example of what the labs at Genencor in Palo Alto have produced in its 27-year history.

Mass-produced biofuel created by an advanced enzyme process is next on the horizon. A joint venture with DuPont is getting ready to build a cellulosic ethanol plant in Tennessee that will be a first step toward building commercial plants capable of producing 25 to 50 million gallons a year.

"Rather than looking at the next five years for this to deploy, we're actually looking at the next year where we'll be in a position not only to have the data required for a commercial plant, but also in a position to start talking to early adopters to do licensing of the technology," said Joe Skurla of DuPont Danisco Cellulosic Ethanol.

It is just one of several biofuel projects racing to create alternative fuels.

"You have Beyond Petroleum making a major investment with the University of California that is now headquartered in Emeryville, and you have Chevron doing a lot of work between the East Bay here and the University of California at Davis," said Matthew Gardner, CEO of BayBio.

Genencor research has created a new synthetic material for car tires, called bioisoprene. Goodyear Tire & Rubber expects it will hit the market in four years. Demand for natural

rubber exceeded supply two years ago, and Goodyear is also concerned about interruptions in supply.

"We would really need to have an alternate source of raw materials to be able to continue to produce tires for everyday use and for more demanding applications," said Jesse Roeck of Goodyear Tire & Rubber.

As global demand grows, Genencor has opened labs in the Netherlands and in China.

The overriding goal is to bring new products to market, and as the people at Genencor like to say, they have their heads in the clouds but their feet firmly on the ground.