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CNY company seeks grant to protect water

O'Brien & Gere hopes to create jobs with technology to detect toxins in water.

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By James T. Mulder
Staff writer

Technology that would allow communities to keep their water supplies safe from terrorists could create up to 500 new jobs in Fayetteville.

O'Brien & Gere, an East Syracuse engineering company, has teamed up with the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse and Illumination Technologies, a DeWitt company, to develop a system that would immediately detect the presence of toxins in water supplies.

The three partners have formed a company, Source Sentinel LLC, that hopes to bring the technology to market and make the product at the former Accurate Die Casting plant at 547 E. Genesee St. O'Brien & Gere already uses the plant for manufacturing.

Terry Brown, chairman and chief executive officer of O'Brien & Gere, said Source Sentinel is seeking state and federal research money. It's also seeking state Empire Zone status, which would provide a package of tax breaks and other incentives.

"A lot depends on how successful we are in getting research dollars to fund the program," he said.

Brown said the detection system has tremendous economic potential. There are about 4,000 unprotected water systems in the United States. If Source Sentinel is successful and manufactures the product in Fayetteville, it could create up to 500 jobs over a five-year period, he said.

"Competition to come up with this technology is fierce," he said. "A lot of companies are trying to do the same thing we are."

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The project is still in the planning stages. Brown said the company hopes to be operating by Jan. 1 and to create about 40 jobs during its first year.

Currently, there is no way to instantly detect contamination in water, according to Brown. Water samples must be sent to labs for analysis. "If a terrorist were to dump toxins in our water supply, it may be hours or days before we would actually know," he said.

ESF researchers are working on technology that would allow for "real-time" detection. The goal is to develop antibodies that would react to contaminants by changing color, Brown said. Those minute color changes would be picked up by light-sensitive detectors.

"Our philosophy at O'Brien & Gere is to bring science into an actual, real-life application," Brown said. "The business and research is connected right at the hip so we make sure the research we are doing has real-time applications and gets to the market relatively quickly."

O'Brien & Gere employs about 800 people in the United States, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Canada and England. Locally, it has about 450 employees. Cornelius B. Murphy Jr., president of ESF, is a former president and director of O'Brien & Gere.

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