BIZ CORNER

By Eve Newman
Boomerang Staff Writer

The newest company to move to the Wyoming Technology Business Center on the University of Wyoming campus has high hopes for its water quality sensors, and the firm plans to grow roots in Laramie.

Pronghorn Technologies, which formed in August, is a collaboration between research scientist Kent Henry, recent UW MBA grad Weston Welch and software engineer Jim Woods. Welch met Henry and Woods last fall while developing a business plan for Henry's technology as part of a new ventures class taught by professor Roland Kidwell. He then entered his plan in the Wyoming $10K Entrepreneurship Competition, taking second.

Henry developed the company's oxidant sensor technology while working for Littleton, Colo.-based ADA Technologies, and the two pitched their plan to ADA and received financial backing to spin their idea off into its own entity that will adapt the technology for commercial use.

"This is a completely Wyoming-based technology," Welch said.

Both said they foresee fast growth, but are committed to staying in Laramie.

"We're a Wyoming-based business that is really here to stay and is founded and staffed by people that want to be here," Henry, the company's president and CEO, said. "That's what we need in this community. That's what we're doing."

What has them so excited is a sensor that will allow customers to control biofilm formation in seawater cooling systems used by submarines, ships and power plants — providing thousands of potential customers.

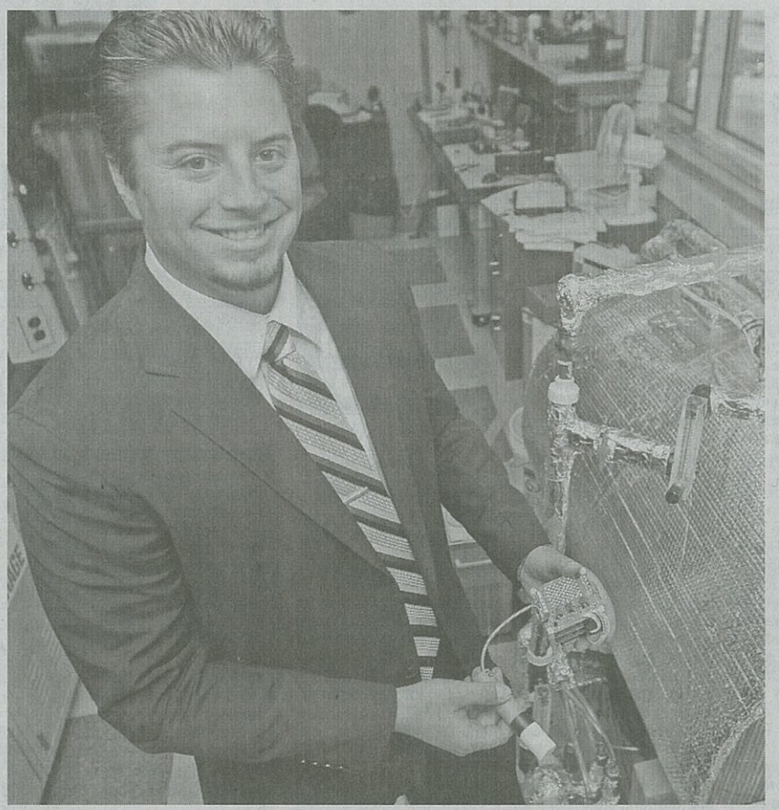
The technology is being requested by the U.S. Navy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration because it would automate the generation of chlorine by ships and submarines, which take in seawater to cool engines and balance loads.

Submarines use generators to pass a current through the water, turning the salt to chlorine, which then kills organisms in the water so they don't clog up transmission lines. When that chlorinated water is dumped back into the ocean, however, it also damages the ecosystem.

"We could help automate these chlorine-producing generators, so that it produces just enough chlorine to kill organisms within the vessel, yet not enough by the time it's discharged that it harms the marine ecosystems," Welch said.

The current process is labor-intensive and unreliable, he said.

"All the customers we talk to are ecstatic about it, because it's so much simpler than current technology and it has so many more features and benefits," he said. "They need a sensor that's robust, that doesn't need recalibrating, that's maintenance free, that will basically save sailors time."



Weston Welch, vice president of marketing and business development with Pronghorn Technologies, holds a chlorine sensor while standing next to a seawater-testing tank inside the Wyoming Technology Business Center. Andy Carpenean/Boomerang photographer

They said working from landlocked Wyoming isn't a detriment, and Henry even collected 2,000 pounds of seawater from Monterrey Bay this spring to bring back to their lab. It's currently sitting in dozens of five-gallon buckets and one larger, insulated tank that they'll use for testing.

As a testament to their Wyoming ties, they named their company after that ubiquitous native animal, the pronghorn.

"The pronghorn represents an animal that is local, and it's a fast, agile animal that's unique," Henry said, adding that those attributes also describe their company.

"When you start describing to people who have never been out West what a pronghorn is, they never forget," he said.

Welch has been networking and finding customers, while Henry, Woods and electrical engineer Dave Harak are finishing research and development, including creating custom electronics and software.

They plan to have eight employees by the end of the year and finish development by mid 2009.

Current funding also includes an $850,000 grant from the Office of the Secretary of Defense Small Business Innovation Research program and a $200,000 grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

ADA Technologies is a research and development company that specializes in creating and commercializing technology.

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