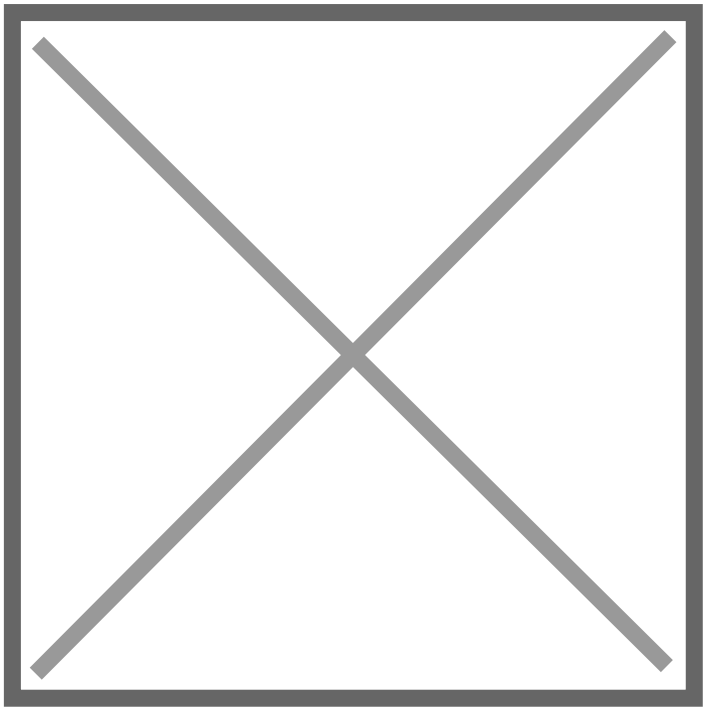
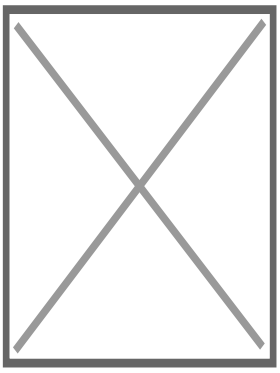


Boosting Bioclusters

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As India's biotechnology industry moves ahead, comparisons with other countries are bound to follow. Are we along the right track? Are we adopting the best practices of the successful biotech industries in other parts of the world? These are some legitimate questions many stakeholders in the Indian biotech sector are asking these days when they meet each other.

Ocimum's L Subhash raised this issue during the Cross Talk organized with S&T Minister Kapil Sibal at the First Biotech CEO Summit organized by BioSpectrum in September. And Sibal replied that Dr M K Bhan, secretary, DBT, was working out the contours of strengthening India's bioclusters. BioSpectrum editorial team too asked these questions to various industry leaders and have put together a comprehensive feature on the status of India's emerging bioclusters.

There are many claimants to the biocluster tag. Almost every state has announced the intention to pursue biotechnology vigorously, having realized that many had missed the 'information technology bus'. Each state is trying to build on its strengths in terms of availability of resources, key ingredients, research centers and human resources.Â But what is clear from our report is that five bioclusters are emerging in the country-Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai-Pune, New Delhi-Lucknow and Chennai. Three of these clusters have already found a place in a recent global listing of bioclusters by a US-based agency. This is certainly heartening because two years ago, India itself did not find a mention in a global listing of bioclusters.

Of course, not everything is in place in these emerging bioclusters. There are many missing links in all these places. What is heartening however is the fact that the key players in these clusters are aware of the gaps and policy makers too, led by Dr Bhan, are determined to make sure that the gaps are filled faster. So these clusters are going to play to their strengths. And other clusters centered around proteomics and genomics too may emerge in the future in and around these existing clusters.

The industry now looks upto Sibal and Bhan to provide it with all the help and make the path clear while announcing the final National Biotechnology Strategy Document. The blueprints for strengthening bioclusters will get the boost with the cabinet approval expected before the year-end.

In another related development, where government policy clearly has a major role in propping up an industry, the Biofuel sector has something to cheer. The government's decision to allow oil companies to buy biodiesel at Rs 25 per liter is a major boost to the fledgling sector. Over dozen biodiesel producers have been waiting just for this announcement, which has the ability to provide a regular marketing outlet for their products. The government has already announced a graded increase in the percentage of blending allowed for biodiesel with conventional diesel. Almost all the experiments using biodiesel in automobiles done recently have given glowing reports about its effectiveness.

With the petroleum prices ruling very high, biodiesel may come in as a savior to the energy-intensive Indian economy.