

Horseshoe lucky for area

Lab that uses crabs' blood to add 60 jobs

By John P. McDermott
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An odd-looking sea critter that's a familiar sight on Lowcountry beaches is doing its part to shore up the local economy.

A biotechnology firm that uses the blood from horseshoe crabs to help drug makers test the safety of injectable medicines and other products said Wednesday that it will increase the size of its Charleston operations by 60 employees over the next five years.



Charles River Laboratories/Provided

Workers at Charles River Laboratories in Charleston bleed horseshoe crabs.

The planned expansion also calls for Charles River Laboratories International Inc. to invest \$20 million in a new research center and warehouse at its existing 80-worker site on Wappoo Road in West Ashley.

"A key driver for our growth is the steady demand for our products," Charles River said in a written statement.

The New England company, which has been seeking property-tax incentives from Charleston County, has been previously publicly identified only by a code-name — Project Fossil.

"The local operation here is driven pretty much by the availability of the horseshoe crab," said Steve Dykes, economic development director for the county.

The company met with local officials about the expansion in 2006 and it decided to go ahead

with the project earlier this fall. The 60 new jobs would increase the lab's local payroll by about \$2 million, for an average of \$33,333, according to documents filed with the county recently.

"It's just a really fascinating local company that is one of those little-told stories," Dykes said Wednesday.

Charleston River is not technically local — its a Wilmington, Mass.-based drug-development research firm with 9,000 employees worldwide — but its roots in Charleston certainly are.

The 61-year-old company found its way to the Lowcountry about seven years after scientist James F. Cooper, a onetime Food & Drug Administration pharmacy specialist, set up a small biotech business called Endosafe in West Ashley in 1987.

Cooper's firm had been drawing the watery blue blood from locally caught horseshoe crabs (before returning them to the ocean) and transforming the liquid into a powdery agent that could detect potentially dangerous toxins in new medicines. Endosafe's method eventually replaced an earlier safety-testing technique as the gold standard in the drug-making industry, and it is still used today.

The local lab has since grown to offer other pharmaceutical-related services and products to a customer base that includes global medicine manufacturers, government agencies and academic institutions. "We basically make sure that new drugs that go to market are safe," said Charles River spokeswoman Amy Cianciaruso.

In a 1989 news article, Cooper said that Charleston was a natural spot for his up-and-coming biotech venture given the region's abundance of large, blood-rich horseshoe crabs, which he described as "living fossils."

Charles River bought Endosafe in 1994.

"The state's commitment to the life-sciences industry, skilled workforce and technological innovation makes South Carolina the ideal location for our expansion," said Foster Jordan, a senior vice president for the company.

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