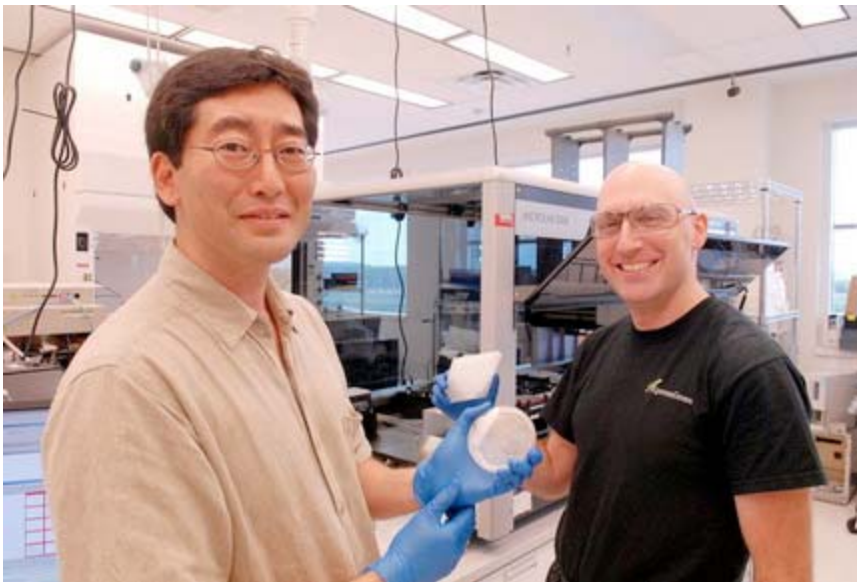


Huntsville scientists developing synthetic solution to Gulf oil spill

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Paul Gattis, The Huntsville Times



Dave Dieter/Huntsville Times

Joe Ng, president of iXpressGenes, and Lance Larka, the company's chief operating officer, are working to develop synthetic microbes that can eat oil.

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- How nice would it be if you could create something that would simply eat the **oil that's polluting the Gulf of Mexico?**

Don't laugh or roll your eyes. The ridiculous is becoming a reality.

"That is a goal," Huntsville scientist Lance Larka said. "That's what we want to do."

Larka is the chief operating officer and technologist at iXpressGenes Inc., a Cummings Research Park company that works under the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology umbrella.

The company was founded last year by Dr. Joe Ng, a University of Alabama in Huntsville biology professor.

And together they are developing just such a creation that might someday be an answer to helping cure the

problems from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Their focus is on synthetic biology. More specifically, iXpressGenes is looking to develop synthetic microbes that would literally eat the oil in the water.

There are natural microbes doing the same thing right now but those microbes, feasting off the abundance of oil, are sucking the oxygen out of the water and creating dead spots - essentially killing the habitat for shrimp and fish that are so critical to the gulf's economy.

Synthetic microbes need no oxygen.

"It's basically mimicking what nature has already done with the existing microbes and do it much quicker," Larka said.

It's cutting-edge research that is still months, if not years, from actually seeing the salty waters of the gulf. Ng said the project is still in the research and development stage.

Still, the iXpressGenes work is getting attention in the scientific world and Ng said the company is putting together a proposal for BP - the company responsible for the spill - to pitch the fruits of its research.

The oil-eating synthetic microbe project isn't the only research ongoing at iXpressGenes. But it's perhaps the most urgent.

Larka cited a recent New York Times article that said oil from the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill is still prevalent just below the surface on beaches in Alaska. And the Deepwater Horizon spill, of course, was much worse.

"The economic damage alone, let alone the environmental damage, just dictates this is a high priority topic," Larka said. "This is a problem we're going to have for decades. The sooner we get started, the better."

Though Ng and Larka agreed they are trying to "hurry up" with the development, science can only go so fast.

But the prospect of possibly having a solution to the oil spill disaster is invigorating.

"Oh, absolutely," Ng said. "A lot of the problems, we can address. This oil spill came up in a timely manner in terms of applications.

"We're very excited about it."

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