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U of G research projects celebrated by province

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Paul Hebert's DNA bar coding work is among the University of Guelph' s largest and most prestigious research projects. With over $7 million in provincial funding so far, Hebert's explorations into genomics are focused, in part, on the production of technology that will enable the easy identification of practically any living species.

Hebert's work was among 21 separate U of G research projects highlighted during a low-key celebration sponsored by the Ontario government yesterday on campus. Guelph MPP Liz Sandals brought attention to those projects and the $12 million from the Ministry of Research and Innovation's Ontario Research Fund that has been funneled into them over the past two years or so, supporting about 200 researchers.

"We're finding that the Canadian system and the provincial system are quite supportive of the science we are trying to carry out," said Hebert in an interview.

The funding directed at the research he leads will allow for the building of a new 40,000 square foot facility dedicated to the International Barcode of Life Project, what Hebert described as the largest biodiversity genomics project ever launched. The project got its start at the university in 2003.

Kevin Hall, university vice president of research, said the institution, recognized as one of the leading research universities in Canada, conducts about $150 million in research annually. Hall said most of the 21 research projects funded by the Ontario Research Fund have social implications.

"It is research that has a benefit to society," he said. Funded projects include one that is developing an online national heritage resource on Canadian writers and writing, one related to boosting the performance levels of wireless internet systems and another studying the effect of dietary fats on cancer.

Sandals said the global recession will alter the global economy.

"We know that the economies that will grow and thrive in the future are those that have a highly educated workforce and which have an innovative research capacity," she said. "The sorts of projects that are going on at the University of Guelph are exactly the sort of projects we need in order to have a secure economic future."

Hebert is heading to Mexico this weekend, where he will meet with 350 of his global scientific colleagues connected to the DNA bar code project.

"They will all be looking at Canada and the University of Guelph as the centre of this international bar code of life project," he said, speaking of the five-year, $150 million project involving 25 countries. By next summer, he said, the project will launch an ambitious effort to collect and genetically map 500,000 species over the next five years.

"We in the scientific community realize we have a responsibility to society, not just to do good curiosity motivated work, but ultimately to contribute back to our province and our nation, and ultimately bring wealth," he said.

One way a global databank of DNA bar codes for the world's flora and fauna could be used is to identify illicit goods at borders and track the spread of disease.