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Five projects receive Fuel Cell Challenge grants

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Five hydrogen efforts, including a company being spun off by a University of South Carolina professor who holds an endowed chair, have been awarded grants from the Greater Columbia Fuel Cell Challenge.

The challenge, begun in 2006, is an effort to spur more hydrogen-related projects in South Carolina and the Midlands. It is offered by the USC Fuel Cell Collaborative, a project of the city, university, EngenuitySC and the S.C. Research Authority. The grants were announced today at the National Hydrogen Association convention in Columbia. Grant values were not disclosed.

The 2009 recipients include NextGenEn, a startup company that plans to produce a portable power device with a solid-oxide fuel cell. Ken Reifsnider, director of the Future Fuels Initiative at USC, is the new company's chief science officer, and USC graduate Chad Sands is the CEO.

Reifsnider holds the endowed chair in solid oxide fuel cells at USC through the Centers of Economic Excellence. The CoEE program is designed to use lottery proceeds to attract top-notch researchers to South Carolina in the hopes that their work in key fields can help spin off new businesses.

The grant will help the company develop a working prototype of a power unit that can work with portable medical devices, the use of which can be infrequent now because of the limits of traditional batteries, Sands said.

The company hopes to have a prototype, about the size of a breadbox, ready in the first quarter of 2010, and in production perhaps in late 2011, Sands said.

Another challenge grant recipient is Dantherm Power, an offshoot of a Danish company with facilities in Spartanburg that will provide backup power units for three city of Columbia radio communications sites.

Tom Ollila, North American business development manager for Dantherm Power, said the company has deployed hundreds of units in Europe and hopes to expand here. It sees a market in backup power for cell phone towers and other key communications systems, especially as cellular communications become the main connection for more users, Ollila said.

If growth takes off in North America, Dantherm Power could expand its Spartanburg facility or build a new one in South Carolina to meet demand.

“South Carolina has a lot to offer on the manufacturing side,” Ollila said.

The other recipients are:

- Logan Energy and Plug Power, which were jointly awarded a grant to test and evaluate a new natural gas-powered fuel cell under real world conditions. The fuel cell unit employs a high-temperature membrane.
- LiftOne, Hydrogenics and Air Products and Chemicals, which were jointly awarded a challenge grant as they conduct demonstration projects for fuel cell-powered lift trucks. The company is demonstrating how hydrogen-powered forklifts can work in warehouses with less downtime than battery-powered vehicles.
- The USC College of Engineering and Computing received a grant for using fuel cells to power part of the scoreboard at USC’s new baseball stadium.

