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ISU Seed Science Center's new addition opens

By: Kathy Hanson , Special to The Tribune

A metal sculpture representing two halves of a seed near the entrance of the new 5,000-square-foot addition to Iowa State University's Seed Science Center served as a focal point for faculty, visitors and guests arriving for the center's dedication and opening ceremony Tuesday.

"The artwork is called 'Twice Sown,'" said Manjit Misra, ISU professor of agricultural and biosystems engineering and the Seed Science Center's director.

It symbolizes how all things are created twice: first, as a mental creation, and second as a physical creation, he said.

Misra said the center's creation is tied to its "dedication to the powerful idea of the land grant mission of helping people through science and technology, especially those who need our help most: women, children, the poorest of the poor and the disenfranchised, no matter where they are, whether in East Africa or in eastern Iowa."

The \$2 million expansion project, made possible by an anonymous gift, will provide space for laboratories, staff and student offices, conference rooms and spaces for visiting scientists. It also will house the Biosafety Institute for Genetically Modified Agricultural Products, which provides science-based analysis of the risks and benefits of genetically modified plant and animal products. It also offers guidance and education to help safeguard consumers and the environment.

"This building is important, but it's the people who do the work here who will make a difference in the world," said Wendy Wintersteen, the dean of ISU's College of Agriculture.

ISU President Greg Geoffroy lauded the center as the "best public seed testing laboratory in the world," citing its research on more than 40,000 samples from 300 seed species and 250 pathogens annually.

"We have programs and partnerships in more than 70 countries" spanning the past 12 years, he said, along with 30 active development efforts in Africa alone.

Constructed to attract and allow leading seed and biosafety researchers worldwide to work together on global issues, the addition will house visiting researchers and permanent scientists from around the world, as testified by James Aketch Okeno, a visiting scientist, faculty member and department head from Kenya.



By Nirmalendu Majumdar/The Tribune
Keynote speaker Namanga Ngongi, left, president of Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa, and Iowa State University President Greg Geoffroy listen during the Seed Science Center's expansion opening ceremony Tuesday in Ames.

"I'm here to develop skills and partnerships," Okeno said. "This center will help transform rural small-scale farmers from net consumers to net producers."

Namanga Ngongi is president of the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa, a Gates Foundation partnership working across Africa to help millions of small-scale farmers and their families lift themselves out of poverty and hunger. He recognized the "raging debate about GMOs" but said few people in Africa have the technical expertise to take part in the debate as informed participants.

"The debate becomes psychological rather than technical," he said. "This center can help Africans enter the technical debate, but more importantly, it will ensure that GMOs are not harmful."

According to Ngongi, the need for research, production and distribution of improved seed crops is dire in Africa.

"Seventy percent of employment in Africa is in agriculture, and many of the farmers are women engaged in small-scale subsistence farming," he said. "They use poor seeds, poor fertilizer and poor techniques. They have not benefited from the green revolution like Asia."

Ngongi listed Africa's annual crop losses as high as 50 percent. Its population is growing faster than its food production, and the expense of importing food is prohibitive, he said. But the partnership with ISU's Seed Science Center will help solve some of Africa's problems along the value chain in the coming decade, he added.

"We are creating a facility where we will attract high-quality people and focus their energies on solving global problems," Misra said.

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