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## Diapers to detergents offer huge market: Itaconix receives grant to produce 'green' polymers from wood

By JEREMIAH TURNER

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DURHAM – A \$1.8 million federal research grant will help fund a recent startup firm's production of "green" polymers, replacing petroleum-based ingredients used in numerous household products from diapers to dish detergents.

Itaconix LLC, based in Hampton Falls with production facilities in Dover, received the grant from the U.S. Department of Energy and U.S. Department of Agriculture. The announcement was made at the University of New Hampshire last week, where the technology first was developed.

Itaconix licensed the technology to produce the new generation of super adsorbents and dispersants. Company co-founder Yvon Durant, Ph.D., is an associate professor in Material Sciences at UNH.

The firm recently started making polymerized itaconic acid using sugars fermented from corn. It has been made until now by various large chemical companies from petroleum products. The grant will help Itaconix eventually replace the corn sugars with wood-based sugars.

"It's something we can do here in New Hampshire, where we have lots of trees," said Durant.

The sustainable or "green" polymers can be used in a variety of applicants, such as an absorbent in diapers and as a dispersant additive in laundry and dishwashing detergents.

The market and the potential for growth are huge, said John Shaw, Itaconix co-founder and president of Kensington Research.

An estimated 1.6 million tons of polymerized itaconic acid derived from petroleum is used annually by U.S. manufacturers alone. The global market could be worth billions of dollars.

The grant award was particularly surprising, said Durant, because only a handful of such grants were given out from among hundreds of applicants.

The grant is tied to the Joint Biomass Research and Development Initiative, whose goal is to develop the necessary technologies and capabilities to produce green fuels and chemicals from biomass instead of diverting corn away from food use.



Turner/Democrat photo Itaconix founders John Shaw, left, and Yvon Durant hold the material they are manufacturing now using a process that utilizes corn sugars. Soon they hope to do the same thing using sugars from wood.

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Itaconix will work in partnership with another firm, Lexington, Mass.-based Microbia, and the University of Maine.

The University of Maine has technologies to extract sugars from wood for fermentation. Microbia has the metabolic engineering capabilities to improve the production of itaconic acid during fermentation from the wood.

"The research possible through this biomass initiative offers another major step toward sustainability and away from petroleum dependence by allowing us to use biomass wood and not divert corn away from food uses," said Shaw, in a press release.

"We have some hurdles to hit, but in a year's time we have gone from the licensing to having two commercial products ... it's very exciting," he said.

Itaconix employs 10 people now and expects to hire five more because of the grant. Eventually it plans to move to a larger production facility elsewhere in the Seacoast and founders say they are committed to staying in New Hampshire.

For more information, visit [www.itaconix.com](http://www.itaconix.com) and [www.microbia.com](http://www.microbia.com).

Erika Mantz at the UNH Media Relations office also contributed to this report.



Courtesy photo Itaconix founder Yvon Durant discusses the firm's work at a grant announcement at UNH last week.

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