Hydrogen brings experts to Columbia

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International conference, expo to look at future of gas as alternative fuel

By Jeff Wilkinson
THE STATE

COLUMBIA — An expected 1,000 or so people from around the globe — researchers, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and techno geeks — will descend on Columbia this week for the National Hydrogen Association Expo & Conference.

And it will be a coming-out party of sorts for South Carolina.

The state has been a hydrogen research center since the Savannah River Site harnessed tritium for H-bombs in the 1950s. But the conference — which features a large international contingent and some of the world's biggest companies — will cement the state on the world hydrogen map.

"This is a big deal," said state House Speaker Bobby Harrell, who will give a keynote address at a special Statehouse event to welcome the conferees.

"It's about science, sure," he said. "But it also lets companies see how nice South Carolina is and how great a place this would be to start a business."

Hydrogen is seen as a cornerstone in the state's effort to retool its economy from manufacturing to high tech, and as a clean and renewable alternative fuel to break the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

The state's research universities, Harrell and others believe, will lead the state's economic development efforts by spinning off high-tech inventions and innovations for entrepreneurs to build companies around.

State and local taxpayers have paid $40.7 million in the past five years to establish a USC research base in hydrogen fuel cells and create a cottage fuel cell industry for Columbia and the Midlands.

And that's just money in the Midlands. Millions of dollars also have been spent in Aiken, Clemson and Orangeburg to establish those regions as centers for other facets of the hydrogen economy, such as production and storage of the gas and its use in homes, cars and public transportation.

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For the $40.7 million investment in the Midlands, the region has attracted $23.4 million in outside research grants and applied for $35.8 million more.

The investment has also generated about 100 jobs and created partnerships with dozens of private fuel cell companies or industries working with the technology.

USC president Harris Pastides said the exposure the region and the state will receive from the conference should make that investment pay even more.

"It's the kind of visibility we couldn't buy," he said. "Having these many hundreds (of hydrogen professionals) here is going to open their eyes. I guarantee some of them didn't know where Columbia was. What they are going to take away is: 'Great place.' "

In the past six years, the conference was held in Washington, D.C. (twice), Los Angeles, San Antonio and Sacramento and Long Beach, Calif.

Association spokesman Patrick Serfass, said Columbia was a natural for this year's event.

"We've been to bigger cities," he said. "But the amount of growth (in hydrogen research and business) in South Carolina is commendable and inspirational. You've got everyone from the mayor to the congressional delegation supporting this technology and using it."

Among the exhibitors at this year's conference, which kicks off Monday at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, are automakers Honda and Daimler, energy giant Shell, the state of California, the U.S. Department of Energy and firms from Germany, Canada and the United Kingdom.

There also will be more than 100 presenters from as far away as Turkey and India and attendees from 30 countries.

"And they are all looking to network in the largest hydrogen conference in the country," Serfass said.

One downside is that the economy has caused many hydrogen and fuel cell companies — usually fledgling firms struggling to leverage the new technology — to cut back on travel expenses.

About 1,000 people are expected at this year's event — down about 30 percent from the 1,500 or so who usually show.