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Ohio leads charge on fuel cells

Wednesday's symposium at CSU to tout collaboration

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Fuel cells are headed out of the labs and into the marketplace. And making them will be profitable, say the organizers of an upcoming symposium in Cleveland.

"This is an effort to give people a picture of how this market is emerging. The underlying theme is that we can create business opportunities," said Rodger McKain, chairman of the Ohio Fuel Cell Coalition and president of SOFCo-EFS Holdings LLC, an Alliance-based fuel cell company created by McDermott Technology.

The coalition, a trade organization founded by the Ohio Department of Development, universities and manufacturers, will hold its fourth annual conference Wednesday at Cleveland State University's Wolstein Center. Registration is required by contacting the Cleveland Engineering Society at 216-361-3100 or online at www.cesnet.org.

"We will have at least 30 exhibitors and are expecting 200 to 250 participants, many from outside the state who now view Ohio as the place for fuel cells," said Ken Alfred, executive director.

"One of the strong themes you will see is the degree of collaboration or alliances that are going on among Ohio organizations - and why it needs to continue to keep us at the leading edge."

Fuel cells convert hydrogen and oxygen directly into electricity without combustion, producing only water as a waste product.

The Solid State Energy Conversion Alliance, a federally funded national alliance of government laboratories and industry created in 1999 to develop fuel cell technology, recognized Ohio in April as the leader in development of solid oxide fuel cells.

The state has awarded \$36 million in research grants to date, with much of that money matched by universities and business.

"That recognition is good and bad," said Mike Martin, director of fuel cell technology at Edison Materials Technology Center in Kettering, near Dayton, and a speaker at the conference. "It's great, but now we have to work all the harder because there are 49 other states that want that as well."

The Edison Center has focused on what Martin calls the fuel cell supply chain, an effort to find Ohio manufacturing companies capable of making the components and subsystems that will be part of any fuel cell system, whether for a laptop, an automobile or stationary power generation.

The center has put together a searchable online database of Ohio organizations, contacts, products and services that will contribute to the supply chain. The database can be accessed from the center's Internet homepage, www.emtec.org.

"We have already talked to 50 companies and academic institutions and know how they will fit," Martin said. "We are working with another 200."

The symposium will also focus on utilities and how fuel cells will one day fit into distribution lines.

Dan Rastler, head of the distributed energy program at the Electric Power Research Institute, based in Palo Alto, Calif., will give an overview of where fuel cells fit in for commercial, industrial and residential use. He will also talk about some of the barriers that could keep utilities from embracing them.

"Under the current business climates of the competitive electric markets, it's very difficult for utilities to see incentives for adopting emerging technologies such as fuel cells because they are under competitive pressure," Rastler said.

Locally, FirstEnergy Corp. is involved in a pilot project with Electric Power Research Institute, the Defense Department, Case Western Reserve University and Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

Two five-kilowatt fuel cell generators have been installed at the park and connected to FirstEnergy's distribution system, said spokesman Mark Durbin.

"Our interest is . . . whether the application would make sense for some of our customers," he said.

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