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UNF patents a system to share emergency data

By Beth Kormanik
Times-Union staff writer

New technology developed at the University of North Florida was made for weather like this.

With hurricanes and tornadoes threatening the state, UNF students and researchers hope their wireless technology will help workers assess sites of emergencies quicker and better.

The process of collecting field information into hand-held devices like Palm Pilots could replace the days of fumbling around for papers and guessing locations when street signs and other landmarks have blown away, said Jerry Merckel, associate dean of the College of Computing, Engineering and Construction.

The technology resulted in the first company spawned from UNF research. The Jacksonville-based endeavor is called GeoAge and its task is commercializing the patented process of collecting field information. UNF has a financial stake in the company and could make money if the venture is profitable.

"Maybe someday UNF has its Gatorade," Merckel said, referring to the University of Florida-created sports drink that has brought UF millions of dollars.

The patent, awarded in June, covers a process of collecting data from hand-held devices or mounted sensors, stamping it with a time and location, recording the information in a database and allowing clients to access the data using the Internet.

GeoAge is marketing the process as a way to respond to emergencies, from natural disasters such as hurricanes to traffic accidents and inclement weather.

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The process is UNF's third patent. The university won its first patent in September 2001 and has two applications pending.

Patents and royalties can bring in big dollars for universities. Columbia University brought in almost \$130 million in licensing income in the 2001 fiscal year and had formed seven start-up companies, according to data from the Chronicle of Higher Education. Another research university, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has formed 29 start-up companies, holds 163 patents and filed for an additional 407.

But UNF's priority will remain involving students in research, rather than focusing on potential dollars, Merckel said.

Sponsored research accounted for \$15.3 million in the last fiscal year, up from \$13.4 million.

The research takes place at the Applied Global Systems Laboratory on UNF's campus. Students work on projects from the weather monitors to others, such as constructing a digital stethoscope at the suggestion of a local doctor who doesn't like to wear the earpieces.

On a recent summer day, students were working on the disaster response project, which is funded by the Florida Department of Health. The goal is automatic reporting of the after-effects of a hurricane. For example, workers would use forms preloaded into their hand-held devices to capture details such as the state of hospitals, schools and other community buildings.

UNF has trained about 150 health workers on disaster assessment teams from Duval, Leon, Citrus and Miami-Dade counties.

"The idea is to have a lot of county health department employees who are prepared to do this," said David Lambert, co-director of the lab.

Another weather-related project is taking place 24 hours a day on Interstate 10. John Sarman, a master's student in computer science, mounted weather sensors on 17 call box towers along the highway. The project, financed by the Florida Department of Transportation, records wind direction, wind speed, temperature, humidity, rainfall and barometric pressure. Students are working with meteorologists at Florida State University to make weather predictions. Researchers can send information to law enforcement and drivers so they know about fog patches, for instance, or other hazards, Merckel said.

The data can be shared on a peer-to-peer network similar to Napster, with a twist, Sarman said.

"I don't trade music," he said. "I trade weather."

Other students are working on a project for JEA that uses a device to measure the water in sewers. The intelligent sensor uses a microprocessor and a sonar sensor to measure the fluid height and transmits results through a wireless pager network.

The sensor would alert JEA to possible sewer overflows without requiring workers to lift heavy manhole covers, said Jonas Goode, senior electrical engineering major. The prototype soon will be tested on 25 manhole covers.

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