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## Biotech & Tech

### Stem cell researchers reeling from proposed 80% fund cut

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Cutting the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund by nearly 80 percent would mean "effectively stopping the program," according to the chair of the commission that oversees it.

A Maryland senate subcommittee voted Friday to cut the \$23 million that Gov. Martin O'Malley proposed for the fund in fiscal 2009 to \$5 million.

The cut would mean the program could award just a handful of scientific grants in 2009, according to Linda Powers, chair of the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund Commission.

"And who knows what happens after that?" she said.

Even restoring the fund to \$15 million — the same amount as its first year, fiscal 2007 — would be welcome in comparison, Powers said.

"If they decreased it a little bit, maybe we could live with that," agreed Jennie C. Hunter-Cevera, board chair of the Maryland Technology Development Corp., or TEDCO, which administers the fund, and president of the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute.

Members of the Senate Subcommittee on Health, Education & Human Resources, part of the Budget and Taxation Committee, cut the fund as they tried to trim \$300 million from the governor's proposed budget for 2009. Final revenue projections for the year — necessary to determine the exact budget shortfall — are due Thursday.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Education and Economic Development has yet to vote on the fund, part of the TEDCO's budget proposal.

A budget analysis prepared for lawmakers recommended adding no money to the fund next year.

Advocates protested that even when fully funded, Maryland's effort is small as it competes with similar programs in other states.

California's multi-year program has a \$3 billion budget, and New York last year began a \$600 million, 10-year initiative.

But even the amount Maryland allocated in fiscal 2007 and 2008 sent a message the state is committed to the field, said Dr. W. Jonathan Lederer, a stem cell researcher at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute, said of the Maryland program.

State programs have sprung up to compensate for federal funding restrictions intended to limit work on the more controversial side of the science, which deals with cells derived from human embryos.

Young scientists looking for a place to begin their careers, or companies looking to lay down roots look for state support, said both Lederer and Powers.

"It's a small amount of money, but it's symbolic," said Lederer, director of UMBI's Medical Biotechnology Center. Lederer won a three-year, \$1.5 million grant last year.

Cuts to the fund would be just as symbolic, according to Lederer.

"It's a bad signal to send," he said.

Fewer scientists likely would go through the trouble of applying for grants if only \$5 million was available, said Powers. That could hurt the quality of the science the commission has to choose from.

"If you have a program where potentially as few as four people are going to get a grant, would you spend two solid months working on an application for that?" Powers asked.

The proposed cuts are leaving scientists such as Lederer and Dr. Lloyd Mitchell, founder and CEO of Bethesda-based Retrotherapy LLC, counting their blessings.

Mitchell, like Lederer, won a multi-year grant from the fund's first-year budget.

Their grants are not contingent upon future state money for the stem cell fund. When the commission awards a multi-year grant, it immediately sets aside full funding for every year of that grant.

Retrotherapy is the only company to have won a grant from the stem cell fund. The other grant winners all are academic scientists.

Mitchell testified on behalf of the fund before the Senate subcommittee Feb. 21. It was his first time speaking before the



*Linda Powers, chairwoman of the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund Commission, said cutting the fund from \$23 million to \$5 million would 'effectively' end the program.*

General Assembly.

Scientists and entrepreneurs like himself are closely watching the state funding programs, according to Mitchell.

"In order to do the work, you have to have the funding," Mitchell said.

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