Sen. Heinrich to introduce ‘tech-transfer maturation program’ bill

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Senators Martin Heinrich, D-N.M. and Michael Bennet, D-Colo. introduced legislation to launch a new National Laboratory Technology Maturation Program (NLTMP) at the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to facilitate successful commercialization of laboratory-developed technologies and boost regional, technology-driven economic impacts.

The bill, S.1259, the National Laboratory Technology Maturation Act, will be considered during a hearing in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on June 4.

Under the National Laboratory Technology Maturation Program, small businesses with licensed technology from a national laboratory could apply for a voucher for up to up to $250,000 to purchase assistance from lab scientists and engineers to mature the technology and further develop products and services until they are market-ready or sufficiently developed to attract private investment. Small businesses with vouchers could also use their local lab’s special equipment, facilities, partner on a commercial prototype, or perform early-stage feasibility or later-stage field testing.

«Connecting New Mexico small businesses with scientists and engineers at Sandia National Laboratories and Los Alamos National Laboratory can spur innovation, boost our private tech industry, and create jobs,» said Sen. Heinrich. «By providing a steady stream of technologies that could yield dividends in commercial markets, we create an environment that strengthens our economy while encouraging future innovators to discover the next breakthrough idea.»

«NREL is a driving force of Colorado’s innovation economy and is helping small businesses throughout our state through its pilot technology transfer program,» said Sen. Bennet. «Expanding this program will allow more small businesses to take advantage of the resources and expertise at NREL and other national labs. This type of investment will help spur more innovation and boost our competitiveness in the 21st century economy.»

A Brookings Institution report last September suggested a voucher program for local businesses could help connect national laboratories with their regions and support innovation and economic growth. The report indicated that the labs should «embrace a new mission that includes more active engagement with regional innovation systems within which they are located.»

Under the NLTMP, each national laboratory could apply to DOE for up to $5 million per year to pay the cost of the vouchers. The bill authorizes NLTMP for five years to provide sufficient time to demonstrate a return on the investment, including such factors as increased licenses to small businesses, jobs created or retained, increased sales, and subsequent funding attracted or leveraged.

Individual projects could receive vouchers up to $250,000. All proposals would be reviewed by a board made up of both technical and business members, with representation from the commercial market.

Throughout the duration of a project, interim progress toward commercialization milestones would be tracked and measured. Each laboratory would be required to submit a report to DOE annually on their implementation of the program, and DOE will submit a report to Congress after five years summarizing the results of the program and proposing possible improvements to it.

In March, DOE’s Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy launched a small pilot program that will select three to five national labs to participate in a voucher program for small businesses focused only on renewable energy and energy efficiency.