

Equine laboratory supporter says UI is paying the price

Key researcher who helped clone mule leaving for Penn; critic says university offered little support for major achievement

By Joel Mills of the Tribune

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Dirk Vanderwall

MOSCOW - From day one, the University of Idaho didn't give proper support to the renowned lab that created the world's first cloned mule, and now it is paying the price, the former chairman of its advisory board claims.

Key researcher Dirk Vanderwall is leaving the university, as did his colleague Gordon Woods in 2006. The departures will probably lead to the demise of the Northwest Equine Reproduction Laboratory, said Idaho Falls veterinarian Bruce Lancaster.

"I can't see how it can survive," said Lancaster, who is also a former president of the Idaho Veterinary Medical Association.

The lab put an international spotlight on the university in 2003 when Idaho Gem was born. Two other cloned mules followed, as did more positive publicity.

"But that's about all we got out of it, was the publicity," Lancaster said. "(The UI) sure wouldn't back us any other way. Dirty's been cleaning his own stalls, for crying out loud."

Vanderwall is heading to the University of Pennsylvania. Woods now works for Colorado State University.

Reached at CSU, Woods said he prefers not to comment on why he left Moscow. But he spoke highly of Vanderwall.

"(Vanderwall) is a blue chip," Woods said. "The guy's just a top-notch professional person."

He said the Idaho Legislature and state agricultural interest groups lined up behind the equine program. "We really did have phenomenal support from the state of Idaho."

The cloning program also got a lot of private support from horse enthusiasts and others. And it got a \$10 million pledge from wealthy attorney and winemaker Jess Jackson, of the Sonoma Valley label Kendal-Jackson, Woods said. In January, CSU announced Jackson's first grant of \$1 million to Woods' research.

Lancaster said the last straw for Woods was when the UI College of Agricultural and Life Sciences wanted to levy a 5 percent administrative "tax" on Jackson's funding. Such taxes are generally used by the college to pay for other expenses.

But Lancaster said the equine lab was the only one in the college singled out for the additional tax.

Vanderwall got the same type of treatment after Woods left, Lancaster said. And the university never really valued the lab since its creation in the late 1980s, he added.

"The leadership didn't have the insight that we hoped they would have, from day one," he said. "Everything we've done and accomplished has been in spite of the University of Idaho, not because of it."

The Legislature appropriated about \$1 million to jump-start the lab in the early 1990s. But the UI opposed that bill because the money came from a tax on horse racing that previously went into its general fund, Lancaster said.

Lancaster said professional jealousy over the lab's success could have contributed to how it was treated. "They ignored us to the point where we couldn't really function as a laboratory."

Ag college Dean John Hammel didn't return calls Tuesday seeking comment. Vanderwall was in Texas and couldn't be reached by phone on Tuesday, his wife Allison Willoughby said.

UI Provost Doug Baker said he wasn't familiar with the issue, and would have to talk to Hammel before he could comment.

Lancaster said the equine research done by Vanderwall and Woods will go on. "It's just going to go on without the University of Idaho."

In addition to the successful cloning program, the lab's research has shown value in human medicine. It developed a technique to manufacture hormones for estrogen therapy from tissue cultures rather than pregnant mare urine, and a patented cadmium-based therapy for diseases like prostate cancer and Type 2 diabetes.

"And still the University of Idaho didn't catch on," Lancaster said. "We're talking about slow learners here."

All at the cost of the best lab of its kind in the world, he said.

"When we cloned those mules, we made it."

Mills may be contacted at jmills@lmtribune.com or (208) 883-0564.