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# Exxon team tours Savannah River National Lab

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The world's largest oil company sent a team to the Savannah River National Lab in Aiken Tuesday to see what it's capable of and, possibly, what's in store for the future.

Exxon Mobil representatives took a private tour of the lab at U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis' invitation. Inglis, R-S.C., says his main goal was "to expose a potential partner to the hydrogen capabilities" of the site.

He said he hopes the meeting and others like it will foster a long-term relationship among the energy sector and the various efforts across the state aimed at ushering in a hydrogen economy. Hydrogen, an invisible gas, is being studied in hopes that one day it can be used to power automobiles and homes, with water being the only byproduct.

"Anytime that we can expose one of the world's leading energy companies to the capabilities of the Savannah River National Lab, it's a good day for South Carolina," Inglis said.

"The companies that are in the oil business are going to need to find a new commodity to sell within the next couple to three decades. They have the distribution networks. They have the capital necessary. They have the expertise necessary ... to distribute hydrogen, just like they distribute gasoline."

Any significant foray into the realm of hydrogen by Exxon Mobil could pressure other oil companies to follow suit.

An Exxon Mobil spokesman did not immediately return phone calls Tuesday.

The meeting was billed "introductory" in nature, a chance to show off the site in Aiken.

"The company has needs worldwide. We believe that some of our technology can meet their needs. And we wanted to start the process to see how we could help them, and how they could help us, so to speak," said Fred Humes, chairman of relatively new S.C. Hydrogen and Fuel Cell Alliance.

"The most important thing with these large companies is that they understand what technologies are present here. We would think we could meet some of their needs that are immediate, but we're also laying the groundwork for the future."

That technology -- and Tuesday's conversation -- includes environmental restoration, extracting oil from various materials, biotechnology and facilities like the International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville and the University of South Carolina's Fuel Cell Program in Columbia.

And, of course, hydrogen.

The Savannah River National Lab specializes in hydrogen storage. Toyota and General Motors announced contracts with the lab late last year to research various aspects of that.

Humes, who also heads Aiken County's Center for Hydrogen Research and the Economic Development Partnership for Aiken and Edgefield counties, hopes to host future visits by Exxon and other energy leaders.

Inglis wants to show off the site to electric providers, too.

"There's no guarantees that (Exxon Mobil) will commit to a hydrogen future or they'll commit to South Carolina," Inglis said. "I hope they do commit to a hydrogen future because they're a very successful company that has vast resources and vast expertise. If they do, I think they will have good memories of the couple days in South Carolina."

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