

Move Planned for New York Drug-Testing Lab

Courtesy of Thehorse.com

After nearly four decades, New York's Cornell University is moving to close its world-famous equine drug-testing laboratory. An equine science program at a state university 70 miles up the road is eagerly willing to take over, and expand, an operation vital to the state's horse industry.

The transfer of lab operations from Cornell to Morrisville State College in central New York could be completed by early next spring, with Dr. George Maylin, one of the leading experts in equine drug testing and veterinary toxicology, making the move with the program, officials said.

"We have as much invested in the racing industry as anyone," said Raymond Cross, president of Morrisville, which has a growing equine science program. "We think this is a nice fit for what we do."

Cross, who is leading what has been a quiet effort for Morrisville to become the state's equine testing lab, talked of ensuring a seamless transfer of the lab from Cornell to his state university facility in the coming months. Beyond that, though, Cross has lofty visions for propping up the lab to not only test equine samples from New York, but other states as well.

He also hopes that someday, the facility becomes a major testing lab for human performance drugs in athletes.

"We believe we can use this as a foundation to create a national drug testing center," Cross said in an interview.

Officials said the lab transfer is a cooperative one between the two colleges. The Cornell lab, tied to its College of Veterinary Medicine and an innovator in equine drug testing, last year conducted 94,000 equine sample tests with the capability of testing for hundreds of various drugs. But Cornell for several years has been quietly threatening to close the facility, arguing to state officials it could no longer afford to run the facility on what the state provided in the way of funding for the tests.

The most recent and most serious came in September, when Michael Kotlikoff, dean of the veterinary medicine program, wrote to state racing regulators of being under "enormous financial pressure" at Cornell over the past year and of a lab facility that has markedly deteriorated in recent times. He said \$9 million is needed for a new lab at Cornell—money the state of New York, given its fiscal

problems, cannot afford. He asked state officials to find another location for the lab.

Meanwhile, state officials said the Cornell program has been getting increasingly expensive for the government. In response to Kotlikoff, New York State Racing and Wagering Board chairman John Sabini wrote back that the state's payments to Cornell for the testing has grown from \$2.2 million in 2004 to \$3.6 million this year, and that indirect costs funded by the state are up 157% during the same period to \$624,000.

The move is not a done deal because it requires a change in state law, which now specifically mandates that equine drug testing be done at Cornell. Lawmakers are already moving to get legislation passed early next year to permit the change to Morrisville.

The state's top racing regulator is behind the Morrisville plan.

"Having the equine experts at Morrisville State College operate our drug program would be a tremendously beneficial development for all racing stakeholders in New York and would unleash the potential for new economic development opportunities in central New York," Sabini said in a written statement. "Should this project move forward, it has the potential to make Morrisville a flagship center for the testing of performance-enhancing drugs not only for horse racing but all sports."

Morrisville has had conversations with Don Catlin, the UCLA doping expert, about future plans to possibly connect the college with the Institute for Human Performance at the state university's Upstate Medical University in nearby Syracuse, part of what some hope to be regional testing labs around the nation for human athlete specimens.

Morrisville officials see the lab as becoming a money-maker for the state down the road, helped, in part, by serving as an equine testing facility for other states—Maylin has had discussions with officials in other states to gauge the opportunities--and through the sale of contaminated horse specimens used by research facilities.

But first, Cross said, the mission is to carry on and expand the lab innovations Cornell has contributed over the years. He believes the lab will fit well with his college's equine science program, which features over 350 students learning everything from the business side of the industry to breeding and training.

The college alone breeds 450 mares a year in an area Cross believes is developing into an “equine ally” of New York. The school is located just east of the Finger Lakes region and south of the Vernon Downs harness track.

Morrisville believes it can run the testing program cheaper for the state, which gets its funding from assessments placed on New York’s racing industry, in part because of the higher expenses associated with the research operation tied to the lab now at Cornell. The college is looking to lease a 20,000-square-foot facility to house the equipment—nearly all of which is owned by the state—and its dozen or so employees.

The plans also call for expanding the college’s current equine science department to include coursework in applied equine toxicology, with Maylin, a fixture at Cornell for 38 years, teaching some of the classes besides being director of the new Morrisville lab.

Cross is hoping to get the lab up and running by about April 1, an ambitious date he said is possible because of the cooperation from Cornell and state officials. The current Cornell contract with the state ends March 31.

Morrisville is getting support from the state’s horse industry, in part, because the money needed to keep the lab at Cornell would eventually be passed along to tracks and owners and breeders in the form of higher assessments by the state.

“One of the things we want to make sure of is: Are we taking care of their interests?” Cross said of the horse industry. “So, this is very important to the horse industry of this state.”

Sabini said he believes the Morrisville proposal meets a challenge by Gov. David Paterson “to find innovative and economically sound public policy decisions.” The state is facing a \$3.2-billion deficit this year and \$7 billion in 2010.

Sabini also praised two state lawmakers from central New York—Senator David Valesky and Assemblyman Bill Magee—for supporting the Morrisville effort. “I’m very impressed by the outside-the-box, creative ideas I have heard from Dr. Cross on how this project could grow into a regional operation and attract business from other states,” Sabini said.