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Hawai'i still near bottom in patents

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Art Simpson created the better mouse trap along with a host of other gadgets designed to pluck pesky pests from home and garden.

Last year Simpson's Doom Dome — a pest catcher that looks like a dome light — was among 33 patents awarded to Hawai'i companies and inventors by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. That's up from 26 patents the prior year, though Hawai'i still ranks 47th among the 50 states in patents issued per 1 million people, according to a report issued in December by the Corporation for Enterprise Development.

Like many inventors/entrepreneurs, Simpson is still waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. The task now is to find partners to raise money, market and distribute the Doom Dome and other products, which include garbage bags trimmed with flypaper, a mouse trap that doesn't pinch fingers and camouflaged pest traps meant to get rid of "ants in your plants."

"Unfortunately, pioneering new products isn't easy," said Simpson, owner of World Pest Control in downtown Honolulu. "It's really tough."

Still, Simpson is optimistic about the future of his patented and patent -pending products.

"Pest control is basically a recession-proof industry," he said. "We'll never get rid of them all."

Patents, which cost thousands of dollars to obtain, were created to protect the right of inventors to profit from their ideas. They're also increasingly considered critical in defending a company against competitors, staking out market share and generating royalties.

And patent activity can be a barometer for an area's ability to innovate. Hawai'i's relative lack of patents may be a result of a tourism/agriculture -based economy, which only recently has begun to diversify into more innovative fields such as biotech, information technology and telecommunications.

"We by and large have not been generating that kind of economic driver because we've been focused on the traditional economic drivers" such as tourism, said Dick Sherman, general counsel for Hawaii Biotech, which received two patents last year.

"But that's changing," he said. That's why it's so exciting right now."

Last year 'Aiea-based Hawaii Biotech, which is among this relatively new breed of high-tech companies, patented ideas being used to develop vaccines for viruses such as West Nile, yellow fever and dengue fever.

"It's fair to say that right now this patent represents the cornerstone of our virus program," Sherman said. "This will be a patent which we will use in our vaccine development."

Among the other patents awarded to local inventors last year were:



Art Simpson of World Pest Control, holds his patented Doom Dome, a crawling insect pest-control device. In background are other pest-control products, including a large multipurpose rodent and crawling-insect bait station that looks like a rock.

Bruce Asato • The Honolulu Advertiser

On the Web

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office:
www.uspto.gov

World Pest Control:
www.worldpestcontrol.com

Peletex Inc.:
www.peletex.net

Datahouse Consulting:
www.datahouse.com

Hawaii Biotech:
www.hibiotech.com

Patents given Hawai'i firms

Number of patents received by Hawai'i companies and inventors since 1995:

Year	No. of Patents
2004*	33
2003	26

• A faster, efficient means of turning green waste into charcoal. The technology, developed by University of Hawai'i professor Michael Antal Jr. was among nine patents issued to UH last year.	2002	26
	2001	29
	2000	29
• A hair accessory storage display.	1999	27
	1998	18
• And numerous innovations with nearly indecipherable titles such as a "membrane immunobead assay for the detection of ciguatoxin and related polyether marine toxins." Honolulu naval architect Oceanit Laboratories Inc. patented that idea.	1997	23
	1996	28
	1995	17

Often, patenting an idea is only half the work.

*As of Dec. 28, 2004

"That's the front-end work," said inventor Clyde Shiigi, president of Datahouse Consulting near Ala Moana Center, who last year patented a method for sending handwritten messages electronically. "There's still a lot of work in the licensing, marketing and distribution of it."

Source: *The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office*

The idea for Shiigi's invention came from work done for the Starlight Children's Foundation in 1997, which helps seriously ill children. Shiigi said he developed a way to allow kids separated from their parents to write or draw messages that could be sent electronically to family members. The technology was tested, but not adopted.

Still, Shiigi hopes the technology will someday be picked up by cell-phone handset makers.

Sometimes one patent leads to another more promising idea. That was the case for Peletex Inc. in Wailuku, Maui, which last year received a patent for a vacuum sanding pole.

Jeff Reiss, Peletex chief financial officer, said the pole was deigned to cut down on dust created from sanding drywall. Unfortunately the dust vacuumed up by the pole would quickly clog traditional paper filters.

To solve that problem the company developed a means of using water foam as a filter medium — an idea that Peletex also patented. So instead of focusing on selling the sanding pole, Peletex is looking to license its byproduct — the so called aqueous froth air filter.

Markets for the filter range from clean rooms, hospitals and defense.

"That's where it started," Reiss said of the sanding pole. "But we've moved beyond that."

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