

High-Flying Vista Photonics Recognized for Growth Potential

By Kathy Keith, Executive Director, Regional Development Corporation

Jeffrey and Melissa Pilgrim launched Vista Photonics in 2003 to research how laser-based trace-gas sensors could be developed for a variety of commercial and project-specific uses.

Among other innovations, the company created an instrument that helps farmers plan harvests by measuring how much ethylene gas crops emit to accelerate ripening. But the couple's favorite brainchild so far is the optical life gas analyzer they developed for the National Aeronautic and Space Administration. The device monitors gas levels on the International Space Station — a function that's critical to maintaining a balance of oxygen, carbon dioxide, water vapor and ammonia in the craft's controlled atmosphere.



These achievements — and the Santa Fe company's growing status as a go-to maker of photonic products for various government agencies — led the Regional Development Corporation to recognize Vista Photonics in November as one of the companies it predicts will bring more jobs and revenue to the region by 2020.

Originally begun to identify and nurture 20 high-growth companies that appeared likely to double their workforce and revenues by 2020, the Northern New Mexico 20/20 Campaign this year exceeded its goal: 25 companies have been inducted into the pantheon so far.

'Growing Ideas'

Melissa Pilgrim, Vista's chief administrative officer, isn't sure her company currently needs the operational, financial and technical advice that comes with a 20/20 award, but she's happy for the acknowledgement of what Vista has achieved. "We were very surprised by it and very pleased to be recognized by someone outside our company."

Vista got its first big break a year after its formation with a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant to develop an optical device for the Commerce Department that could measure carbon monoxide quickly and accurately. SBIR has since provided numerous other opportunities for Vista to partner with other government agencies — including the departments of energy, agriculture and defense — to develop high-tech solutions to problems these agencies consider pressing.

These grants are especially helpful for tech development companies, Pilgrim said, because “you never know if something will work — or if it will be too expensive” to be practical as a commercial product.

Right Place, Right Time

Vista’s star is rising just as New Mexico is competing to become a national center of research into how photonics — the science and application of light — can be used in medical imaging, national security and robotics.

Several photonics companies are clustered in the Albuquerque area, but the state wants to become the site of an Integrated Photonics Manufacturing Institute — one of four manufacturing innovation institutes being created nationwide to develop different technologies.

Pilgrim believes her company is well positioned to benefit from industry expansion. “We’re constantly evolving and changing. We’re not the same company we were 10 years ago. We look at more opportunities and better ways to do our jobs well and continue to be inventive. We don’t look at growth as just the number of people we employ but the way we’re growing ideas.”

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