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President of Ecuador Rafael Correa Advances Plans for Biotechnology Research at the “City of Knowledge”

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Report Highlights:

In a private visit the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, toured the North Carolina Research Campus to explore how he can establish a life sciences, high-tech, petrochemical and renewable energy research facility near Ibarra. Land is already acquired and a first phase is expected to cost \$50 million.

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On October 30, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa visited North Carolina’s research facilities and was hosted on his U.S. trip by U.S. businessman David Murdock. His tour included the North Carolina Research Campus (NCRC). The President’s trip was exploratory and assessed whether the NCRC could be used as a model for partnership and research as envisioned for a research park for Ecuador. Ecuador’s planned park has been named “Yachay” or the City of Knowledge. This visit was “private” in the sense that no meetings were with U.S. federal officials.

According to North Carolina newspapers and the Ecuadorian Presidential press office the visit’s purpose was to scrutinize organization and structure of scientific projects that are currently in progress in different universities sharing space at NCRC. In the city of Kannapolis Rene Ramirez, the head of the National Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (Senescyt), made a presentation to Murdock and his team. Ramirez’s team unveiled plans for the City of Knowledge or "Yachay", a facility under construction in the northern Ecuadorian province of Imbabura. The Yachay facility is intended to stimulate research for life sciences, nanotechnology, ICT, renewable energy and petrochemicals. The life sciences branch will reportedly focus on state-of-the-art biotechnology research. FAS Quito has reported separately on President Correa’s stance on the current language in the nation’s constitution, which severely restricts biotechnology. Correa has pointed out that the Constitution does not prohibit biotechnology research but that it requires it to be regulated.

President Correa wants Ecuador’s future research facility to have an impact on all of South America. The Government of Ecuador has acquired nearly 4,000 hectares (roughly 10,400 acres) of land for this project. Some of the land was expropriated despite landowners’ complaints that they did not receive fair compensation from the government. Yachay’s grounds will be destined for the following uses: agricultural production area (1,800 ha), ecological protection zone and archaeological reserve (1,300 hectares), tech zone (690 hectares), and an urban area of (640 ha) which will house a University Technology Park for Commerce and Business. The urban area will integrate existing towns and total approximately 160 hectares. According to the government of Ecuador, Urcuquí was chosen for this project with optimal access in mind, as the location is 1.5 hours from the new International Airport of Quito. The location was justified for suitability of terrain, weather, connectivity, water availability, and other factors such as the establishment of laboratories and high tech research centers. Initial land development started in March 2012 and the cost of the first phase of the project is estimated at \$50 million.