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Singapore, France to set up virtual biotech lab jointly

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Under a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in Paris, Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star), the National University of Singapore, France's National Centre for Scientific Research, National Institute of Applied Sciences and National Institute for Agricultural Research Toulouse will set up the virtual lab to work on projects in the fields of systems and synthetic biology.



Researchers in Singapore and France are setting up a joint virtual laboratory to deepen collaboration in the field of biotechnology, as part of efforts to ramp up innovation and research linkages between the two countries this year.

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It is the latest in a series of bilateral exchanges under the France-Singapore Year of Innovation 2018, first announced in March last year by then French President Francois Hollande and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Multidisciplinary teams from both countries will develop high-value products for different industries using biotechnology, said Dr Benjamin Seet, executive director of A*Star's Biomedical Research Council.

"Developments in biotechnology have provided us new tools and approaches to make products that may no longer be economically or sustainably harvested from nature. These could include flavours, fragrances or compounds that deliver functional benefits to the consumer," he noted.

For example, A*Star's Biotransformation Innovation Platform uses microbes to impart flavours and functional benefits to food, produce high-value compounds sustainably, and convert food industry side streams into value-added products.

Dr Kenneth Lee, senior director of A*Star's food and nutrition and consumer care cluster, said: "Singapore is evolving rapidly into a science and innovation hub for food and consumer care. Over the last few years, global giants of the food and consumer care industry have either established or expanded R&D centres in Singapore," reported The Straits Times.

These include leading French companies like plant-based ingredients maker Roquette, flavour and fragrance manufacturer Mane, and yeast maker Lesaffre.

"A*Star partners many of these companies, applying approaches like biotransformation to develop safe, sustainable and healthy food," said Dr Lee.

France and Singapore have enjoyed strong cooperation in science and technology over the years. For instance, a national-level MOU signed between the Agence Nationale de la Recherche and the National Research Foundation Singapore (NRF) in May 2014 established a three-year scheme for joint funding of French-Singapore collaborative research projects.

Several French multinational firms have set up research and development facilities in Singapore, as well as research agreements with local universities and research agencies.

The French government has also conferred the Order of the Legion of Honour on several Singaporeans in recognition of their efforts to boost bilateral science and technology cooperation.

Recipients include NRF chief executive Low Teck Seng, A*Star chairman Lim Chuan Poh, and Nanyang Technological University vice-president Lam Khin Yong.