

[With \\$1m grant from DOE, University of Texas pushes geothermal entrepreneurship](#)

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Body

As announced on the website of the University of Texas at Austin, the Cockrell School of Engineering is launching a unique initiative that aims to make the school a national hub for geothermal energy expertise and startups. The initiative has been made possible with a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy.

The new Geothermal Entrepreneurship Organization (GEO) will bring together engineers, researchers and entrepreneurs to develop technologies and launch companies to help advance the geothermal energy industry.

The organization, led by Jamie Beard and Bob Metcalfe of the Cockrell Schools Innovation Center, aims to leverage areas of excellence in geosystems and drilling engineering at UT to spur geothermal technology development and maturation. The effort will engage all groups with relevant expertise within the Cockrell School, UTs Jackson School of Geosciences, the **Bureau of Economic Geology**, the College of Natural Sciences and the universitys more than 20 energy research centers. Beard and Metcalfe plan to complement that expertise with the vast community of entrepreneurial talent across campus and in Austin.

Its a straightforward concept. Drilling technically complex, high-temperature and high-pressure wells is a core strength of the oil and gas industry. Lets use all of that learning and expertise to drill for heat tapping a vast CO2-free, clean energy source, Beard said. We want to take advantage of Texas existing intellectual capital and leadership in geosciences and drilling to build the future of energy. By leveraging technologies and methodologies developed here over the past century and building upon them with new innovations, Texas can pioneer our clean energy future. And doing this wont require a moonshot. We can make geothermal energy a ubiquitous utility within a decade.

Geothermal energy is produced by converting heat emanating from the Earths core into electricity. Countries such as Iceland, where there is heavy volcanic activity, have been using geothermal energy for over a century. But they can access geothermal heat sources with relative ease because very high temperatures are encountered close to the surface. UTs GEO is focused on developing and commercializing advanced high-temperature and high-pressure drilling tools that will enable geothermal energy production worldwide, which means developing drilling technologies that can economically reach depths of up to 30,000 feet and operate at temperatures exceeding 350 degrees Celsius. The goal is to enable reliable production and use of geothermal energy anywhere in the world.

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Much of the expertise at UT needed to develop the necessary drilling tools, technologies and methodologies lies in the Cockrell Schools Hildebrand Department of Petroleum and Geosystems Engineering.

Geothermal energy offers an avenue for oil and gas companies to reinvent themselves as sustainable energy providers, while doing what they do best—drilling the most difficult wells in the world, said Eric van Oort, a professor in the Hildebrand Department and a co-investigator in GEO. Moreover, the oil and gas industry has a large amount of experience in drilling deep high-temperature, high-pressure wells that can be straightforwardly leveraged into deep geothermal drilling and well construction. This is not a blue-sky ambition. This can happen in the near term with incremental developments based on existing technologies in use today.

During the past few decades, other renewable energy sources, like wind and solar power, have been growing steadily in the U.S. Relatively low-cost advances in technology have allowed producers in both sectors to increase market share through economies of scale, driving consumer prices down enough to compete with conventional energy suppliers such as oil and gas. But breakthrough innovation in the geothermal space remains stagnant.

We already know what we need to do, Beard said. We may not have the technology to do it yet, but a more focused research approach would inevitably lead to the innovations we need. Access to widely available baseload geothermal energy will also require significant capital investment in far greater amounts than what is being spent at present.

Still, throwing money at a problem doesn't guarantee a solution, Beard said. That's why the entrepreneurial part of the initiative is critical.

The GEO will foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem in tandem with focused research so that new tools can make it to market efficiently and industry can start making progress quickly.

We have to be sure that relevant technologies get field-tested and quickly commercialized, said GEO's principal investigator Bob Metcalfe. The valley of death that technologies experience when they emerge from research labs is deep in the context of drilling technologies, because the technologies need to be relatively mature before they can be field-tested. That makes startups and commercialization an essential part of our effort. We will create clusters of geothermal startups based on technologies developed at UT to infuse the industry with fast and impactful innovation that is mature enough for industry to immediately leverage. 2019 Global Data Point.

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