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Business North - The Daily Briefing - Business Newspaper Online

Franken visits Duluth research institute



(Photo: NRRI director Michael Lalich and Senator Al Franken.)

Only a little more than a month in office, U.S. Senator Al Franken (DFL-Minnesota) toured the Natural Resources Research Institute in Hermantown August 13. Senator Franken's staff initiated the tour.

"You can't get a brain aneurysm this size, can you?" the former professional comedian said while examining a two-foot long plastic model. Looking at "House 3," a prefabricated building designed to be easily shipped, constructed and taken down, he questioned whether there'd be a House 4 that could travel through time.

When offered a Senate seal with his name on it, made with a 3D printing machine, he said, "I don't think I can take this, it's over the gift limit." He accepted it anyway.

His tour of the institute covered the many projects it researches: earthworm migration ("Worms don't travel fast?" Franken said, feigning surprise), ethanol, mathematical and environmental chemistry, taconite tailing products, wood products, Mesothelioma studies, Great Lakes research, peat bog restoration, a moose census ("Is the plural mooses, meeses or moose?"), mineral resource mapping and more.

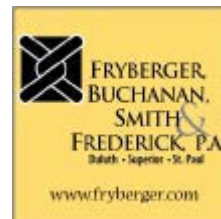
The institute is financed by a combination of state and federal funds, private grants and client services. Its budget varies from year to year, having peaked at \$16.5 million in 2004, but down to \$13.3 million this year. It employs up to 200 people, including students, at its four facilities in Northeastern Minnesota.

The institute was launched in 1985, after the region's mining and wood products industries went into a downturn. An arm of the University of Minnesota Duluth, its goal is to foster a diversified yet environmentally sound economy in the region.

The state of Minnesota provides approximately \$3 million a year, but along with many state-funded agencies the institute took an eight percent cut this year. As a result some programs have shut down and faculty positions not replaced after retirements. "We've suffered a little, but we're on the upswing," said director Michael Lalich.

Franken said that \$470 million in federal funds is set aside for environmental research of the Great Lakes and suggested some of that money could go to the institute.

Asked about health care legislation, he predicted a bill would



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by Richard
Thomas

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pass Congress and be signed by the President by the end of the year.

Franken is scheduled to tour the Iron Range on Friday.

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