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Geology for the future New lab aids scientists studying sources of energy

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Thousands of cylindrical samples of underground rock are aiding Western Michigan University researchers and others in the quest for new energy sources and the battle against greenhouse gases.

The samples are stored in the recently refurbished former Whitman Saddle Manufacturing plant near U.S. 131 north of Stadium Drive. The 28,000-square-foot geosciences facility houses the newly established Michigan Geological Repository for Research and Education and the WMU core laboratory.

Inside the modern, concrete building, renovated with the help of nearly \$600,000 in federal funds and assistance from private donors and others, are rows and rows of samples of rock, and oil and gas deposits.

WMU is leasing the site for the WMU core laboratory, founded 24 years ago by William Harrison III, a retired WMU geosciences professor, as well as the geological repository. The facility is a big step up from the lab's previous home in WMU's West Hall.

"We had been in the second-oldest building on campus," Harrison said. "Where we are now is perfect."

"The state's pre-eminent source for data on Michigan's subsurface geology has a new home and broader mandate for serving the state and the nation," Harrison said.

Harrison began the core laboratory as a place in which scientists could store and do research on the cylindrical rock samples that are provided primarily by oil and gas exploration companies after they have drilled in an area.

G. Michael Grammer, associate professor of geosciences, is heading the Michigan Geological Repository for Research and Education.

He said the new repository includes the core laboratory's original work and mission, as well as provides space for many of the educational, research and outreach activities of WMU's Geosciences Department.

The new repository is big enough to house pending donations of rock samples from the state of Michigan, other Michigan universities, private companies, the federal government and a facility in Texas, according to a press release.

"It is hard to exaggerate the value of rock samples such as these," Harrison said, comparing the samples to rare manuscripts.

Researchers from all over will be able to come here to sift through data that could, among other things, help them locate and develop environmentally friendly ways to better manage oil and gas deposits.

"These resources are more important than ever," Harrison said. They provide information, he said, to researchers seeking ways of boosting domestic oil and gas production -- at a time of soaring energy prices and increasing dependence on foreign oil and gas.

"You never know what the future will bring, and so it is important to keep the material around so future generations can take a look and use it," Harrison said.

Grammer said he and other WMU researchers are involved in a range of projects. Grammer leads a research team investigating "a subsurface formation known to produce significant oil and gas," according to the press release.

In addition, David Barnes, an associate professor, is seeking ways to reduce greenhouse gases by storing these gases -- thought to be a cause of global warming -- in underground rock formations in Michigan.

WMU researchers began moving into the new facility earlier this year.