

By Heather Moore

HOLLY SPRINGS, N.C. -- North Carolina is now home to the nation's first pandemic-ready flu vaccine manufacturer. On Monday, federal government leaders declared Novartis' Holly Springs facility ready and able to respond in the case of an international flu outbreak.

"There is life and death importance for all of us to being ready for a flu outbreak," said Gov. Bev Perdue.

"This is a critical national facility," said Rep. David Price, a Democrat representing North Carolina's 4th District. "It plays a key role in strengthening our nation's defenses against pandemic diseases by producing new vaccine platforms that will enable us to respond effectively to outbreaks as well as conventional public health threats."

The Holly Springs facility uses cell cultures to make the flu vaccine instead of the traditional egg-based vaccine. Health experts say that means the company can respond faster in a pandemic, able to make 150 million vaccine doses in just six months if needed.

"The domestic capacity for pandemic is important because a pandemic is a global event," explained Dr. Nicole Lurie, Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "It's a worldwide event. We want to be self-reliant. We want to be able to depend on U.S. production."

"To protect the American People is an incredible success story," Sen. Richard Burr said.

In addition to responding to a flu pandemic, the Novartis plant also makes vaccinations for the seasonal flu.

The Holly Springs plant employs more than 400 people and plans to add another 100 by the end of 2012.