Biotech industry seeks 'honest brokers'

[LYONS] The momentum for the development of biotechnology has been seriously set back in Europe by the consumer backlash against genetically modified crops, leading industrialists last weekend. Public confidence, they acknowledged, is a prerequisite if the wider fruits of biotechnology are to be achieved.

This was one take-home message from a four-day meeting in the French city of Lyons which brought together hundreds of delegates, including the chief executive officers of major life-science companies such as Monsanto and Novartis, several Nobel laureates, including David Baltimore, president of the California Institute of Technology, and many leading biotechnologists and geneticists.

The meeting, named 'Biovision', was organized by Raymond Barre, mayor of Lyons and former French prime minister, in conjunction with the US and French academies of science and international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Billed as the first of a biannual life-sciences equivalent of Davos — the international meeting of politicians and industrialists held each year in the Swiss city of that name — it is intended to create dialogue between the warring factions in the biotechnology debate.

But the few politicians or public figures present, such as Lionel Jospin, the French prime minister, and Gro-Harlem Brundtland, the director-general of WHO, just flew in, gave their speeches, and flew out. Environmental and consumer groups were outnumbered by pro-biotechnology industrialists and scientists.

The debates, frequently heated, covered controversial areas of biotechnology and were often relevant to developing countries. Florence Wambugu, director of the Kenya-

Double trouble: the biotechnology industry and Greenpeace have different visions of the future.

based International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications, for example, attacked opposition to gene technology as a northern luxury. "The biggest risk in Africa is doing nothing," she said. "I appreciate ethical concerns, but anything that doesn't help feed our children is unethical."

The meeting was dominated by discussion of agricultural genetics, bioethics and public perception, in particular the backlash in Europe against genetically modified crops. Some delegates, such as Joël de Rosnay, director of strategy at the Cité de Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris, maintained that this was simply due to the ignorance of the public, and would disappear if means could be found to educate them.

But Sheila Jasanoff, professor of science and public policy at the University of Harvard, described such attitudes as a "misconception". And there was widespread agreement that the recent advertising campaign by Monsanto to 'inform' the public had only served to deepen public suspicion.

Heinz Imhof, president and director-general of Novartis Seeds, said that companies were perhaps asking for trouble in introducing crops first that, although valuable to farmers, provided few benefits to consumers. The belief among European consumers that genetically modified organisms were being imposed had to be "taken account of" he said, endorsing, as did the meeting, the need for a workable system to label such foods.

The main message of the meeting was that the public's perception of biotechnology is the main challenge to be overcome if the industry is to realize its full promise in terms of improving crop yields and boosting their nutritional and other qualities.

To this end, it identified a need for 'honest brokers' trusted by the public. It concluded that much of the greater acceptance of biotechnology in the United States than in Europe is due to greater public confidence in the independence and competence of the regulatory and scientific advisory system. The US public tend to trust agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, it was argued, whereas this trust was lacking in Europe after the crisis over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Independent scientific advice was key to public trust, said Jospin, adding that he planned to set up a review of biotechnology decision-making in France.

John Pattison, chairman of the UK government's spongiform encephalopathy committee, said he would transmit to government the need for independent and trusted scientific bodies if public trust was to be rebuilt.

The meeting concluded that ethics committees provide a forum for public debate of such issues. But it also recommended the creation of a European Foods Evaluation agency, as well as independent European and international technology assessment bodies. Brundtland added that WHO intended to set up such a unit to guide its policy setting, by producing global epidemiological analyses and analysing health priorities, policy options and the outcomes of health initiatives.

It was concluded that scientists should anticipate and publicize issues, such as cloning, before they become the focus of media attention. The meeting also suggested that international guidelines for biotechnology research should be established that the public would understand. Progress in these directions should be reviewed at Biovision 2001, it said.

Declan Butler

Asians link up to protect plant resources

[NEW DELHI] Seven countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) reached an agreement last week not to pass on the plant genetic resources that they exchange among themselves to any country outside the association.

The agreement was reached at a four-day meeting of SAARC countries held to evolve joint strategies for dealing with the issues of plant genetic resources and intellectual property rights, and "to preserve and protect the plant genetic resources of the region". They also agreed to cooperate in addressing the emerging biosafety issues related to genetically modified organisms.

The seven countries — Bangladesh,

Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — agreed to exchange plant germplasm for research purposes freely, but only among themselves. Initially, rice, wheat and maize varieties will be exchanged.

The seven countries also agreed to exchange experts as well as information, and to hold an annual meeting to discuss issues raised over plant genetic resources. But an offer by India to use its gene bank, which has a capacity for one million seed types, for storing the germplasm of SAARC countries was turned down. An Indian official said members wanted their scientists trained in India, but preferred to build their own gene banks.

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