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Britain seeks transgenics deal to fend off transatlantic trade war

David Dickson, Bangkok

Britain is expected to offer this weekend's meeting of the group of eight (G8) leading economic powers a set of proposals aimed at heading off a transatlantic trade war over genetically modified (GM) food.

The measures are being fine-tuned by senior British officials after an international meeting of 300 specialists in transgenic technology in Bangkok last week. British Prime Minister Tony Blair is expected to put them to his fellow G8 leaders at their annual summit, which starts on 20 July in Genoa, Italy.

Blair may suggest greater harmonization on guidelines for measuring the environmental impact of GM organisms, and more international discussion on the matter to be held between both governments and non-governmental organizations.

Another proposal could be for an accelerated programme of 'capacity-building activities' in biosafety, particularly in developing countries.

The package is also likely to include a call

See no evil: protesters in Bangkok signal their doubts over biosafety and genetic modification.

for greater commitment to publicly funded research into the safety of the technology. Blair may argue that too much of the research on which biosafety decisions are currently based is conducted in the private sector.

All of these issues were raised at a three-day conference in Bangkok on 10–12 July,

organized jointly by the British government and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with the support of several intergovernmental organizations.

The meeting brought together participants from both developed and developing countries, representing the views of industry, government agencies, consumer and farming organizations, and environmental pressure groups.

But rather than reflecting a consensus among the participants — which the conference unsurprisingly did not find — Blair's proposals will be based on the personal conclusions of the chairman of the meeting, Lord Selborne, a former chairman of the UK Agriculture and Food Research Council.

At the conference itself, representatives of the agrobiotechnology industry, the United States, and some developing countries including China, expressed strong support for GM crops.

Jikun Huang of the Chinese Academy of Sciences said that a survey of farmers in China using *Bt* cotton, which produces a natural insecticide, had revealed a range of advantages, from increased yield to significantly lower pesticide poisoning.

But environmentalists rejected this optimistic picture and Chebet Maikut, chairman of the Uganda National Farmers' Association, said that many small farmers are worried about the extent to which GM crops

Smithsonian head ruffled by inquiry

Corie Lok, Washington

A government agency is investigating a private collection of artefacts held by the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Lawrence Small, to see if they were taken from endangered species.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service began an earlier investigation into Small's collection of masks, head-dresses and costumes of South American origin after pictures appeared in the January 2000 issue of *Smithsonian*, the institute's monthly magazine. Officials at the service apparently suspected that the pictures included feathers from protected bird species and teeth from endangered cats.

The original investigation ended earlier this year after Small provided import permits and a letter detailing the 1988 purchase of the collection from an undisclosed seller. A spokeswoman for the

Fish and Wildlife Service declined to give the reason behind the reopening. A spokesman for the Smithsonian said that Small is cooperating with the investigation.

Trading of items from endangered species violates the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and other federal laws. Penalties include confiscation, fines and even imprisonment.

The investigation is not the only controversy Small has faced. His proposal to streamline research at the Smithsonian by closing two research centres was sharply criticized by scientists. Earlier this year, Small reversed his decision to close one, the Conservation and Research Center in Virginia. And a Senate budget subcommittee recently voted to maintain funding for the other, the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education in Maryland. ■

were allowing foreign-owned companies to control access to seeds.

Selborne said at the end of the meeting that it had not been designed to reach agreement on the issues discussed. He nonetheless drew several personal conclusions, which will be submitted to Blair as the prime minister prepares for the G8 summit.

One of these will urge governments "to ensure that there is an acceptable balance between public and private research funding for biosafety applications".

A separate report on the Bangkok meeting is due to be presented to the G8 summit by OECD officials. The OECD was asked for guidance at the G8 meeting in Cologne two years ago, and helped to organize last week's conference and a similar meeting held jointly with the British government in Edinburgh last year (see *Nature* **404**, 112; 2000) to help to formulate its response.

One proposal that emerged from Edinburgh — the creation of an international panel to study the scientific basis of concern over the safety of GM crops — was rejected by the G8 nations in the face of opposition from the United States.

British officials hope that a more limited set of proposals will win the endorsement of the G8 countries and thus help to prevent differences between Europe and the United States from developing into a full-blown trade conflict. ■

Millennium Dome sees signs of a Wellcome break

Peter Aldhous, London

London's Millennium Dome could be transformed from a national embarrassment into a leading centre for biomedical research.

The Wellcome Trust, the world's largest medical research charity, has reportedly earmarked £300 million (US\$420 million) for a bid to convert the riverside site into laboratories and an exhibition space featuring the trust's work.

The trust would not comment on the reports, which first appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph*, but issued a statement saying that its "investment portfolio is constantly under review and at any one time several opportunities may be under consideration".

The Dome was conceived as the centrepiece of Britain's millennium celebrations, its huge tent-like structure housing a series of exhibits illustrating contemporary life. It cost more than £600 million, but attracted only about half of its projected 12 million visitors during its year-long opening. The whole site now lies empty, costing the government £1 million per month to maintain.

Buying the Dome is well within the financial reach of the Wellcome Trust, which has assets of some £15 billion. The £300 million is reported to cover both the costs of purchasing the site and building laboratory facilities.

The Wellcome Trust has previously invested large sums in research facilities, most notably to build the Sanger Centre at Hinxton near Cambridge, responsible for sequencing one-third of the human genome.

But the trust has been frustrated by the denial of planning permission for a £100-million extension at Hinxton to provide space for spin-off biotechnology companies (see *Nature* **400**, 803; 1999). The trust says it still intends to pursue a revised application.

There is a shortage of laboratory space in the British capital, as highlighted by a group called the London Biotechnology Network, which said last month that up to 40 new biotech companies will need more than 5,000 square metres of lab space within the next two years. ■

Sales pitch: will Wellcome buy London's Dome?

Simple technology could reclaim America's lost votes

Mark Schrope, Washington

Pencil, paper and simple optical scanners are the most reliable proven technologies for avoiding another voting fiasco akin to last November's US presidential election, say some of the country's leading scientists.

David Baltimore, president of the California Institute of Technology, and Charles Vest, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, jointly launched the Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project a few weeks after the election.

The project's findings — issued on 16 July — are that high-technology solutions have a poor record in improving voting accuracy, and that authorities should abandon them. The report, *Voting: What Is, What Could Be*, says that paper ballots and optical scanners are the most accurate, with an error rate of around 1.5%, whereas punch-card machines and electronic devices register nearly twice as many errors.

The report points out that Internet voting and other advanced solutions could

open the door to large-scale, systematic voter fraud in the United States. It argues, nonetheless, that "properly developed" high-technology options could eventually prove superior to what is currently available.

The widely publicized problems that dogged last year's vote in Florida, where George W. Bush beat Al Gore by a tiny margin, were rampant throughout the country, the project finds.

"The problem is more serious than we had imagined even last December," says Baltimore. "The voting process has simply not been taken seriously as a central element of the democratic process."

The group estimates that between 4 million and 6 million votes were lost because of ballot, registration and other problems. To slash that number by about 1.5 million in the next election, the project recommends abandoning existing electronic, punch-card and mechanical-lever systems in favour of hand counting and optical scanning of hand-marked ballots. It also calls for a new system for field-testing

other alternatives.

According to the report, procedural changes such as making regional registration information available at polling sites could prevent the loss of another 2 million or so votes, but further reductions will require better voting technology.

It recommends federal funding to develop new voting technologies which could include ballots, either electronic or paper, that can be printed on-site, allow voters to confirm their selections, and be stored for later review. Although optical-scanner systems come closest to that, they have drawbacks, including high costs, inflexibility and significant scanning inaccuracy.

"We want every American's vote to count," says Vest. To that end, he says, the next phase of the project will focus on the design of new equipment and processes. "Computer technology appropriately applied offers significant opportunity for cost-effective advances," he says. ■

► <http://www.vote.caltech.edu>