

Monterey woos biotech firms by relaxing field trial rules

San Francisco. Monterey County in California, the site of one of the earliest and most publicized controversies about agricultural biotechnology in the United States, has relaxed an eight-year-old law that has severely limited field experiments using genetically manipulated organisms (GMOs).

The law was one of the first attempts to place significant restrictions on the environmental release of GMOs, and is often cited as an example of public fear of the technology because of efforts to experiment with frost-resistant strawberries.

According to Richard Nutter, Agricultural Commissioner of Monterey County, the county's decision to soften its rules demonstrates a new acceptance and understanding of the technology. "Genetic engineering is becoming part of our culture," he says.

Monterey County is the salad bowl of the United States, producing \$2-billion worth of crops annually. Those who have been seeking reduced barriers to biotechnology have emphasized its potential for producing salt-tolerant and pest-resistant crops, as well as new types of agricultural products.

Until now, field trials of GMOs have required a special permit and approval from the county planning commission, whose review has included both traffic studies and an assessment of the local environmental impact. Studies within two miles of any occupied structure were prohibited.

These rules were approved about a decade ago, when Advanced Genetic Sciences, now known as DNA Plant Technology Inc., wanted to test a frost-protecting microorganism that it had developed on Monterey County strawberries.

Controversy over the proposal was particularly heated because the company had already tested the genetically altered organism illegally on the roof of its laboratories in Oakland. In addition, county officials had been unable to learn the location for the Monterey trial because of patent and trade secret restrictions.

The revised rules require field trials of GMOs to be carried out more than 100 feet away from an inhabited structure, providing that the trials meet state and federal safety regulations and that they have been approved by a committee made up of the agricultural commissioner, the county's head of environmental health and the director of the planning department.

The five-member county Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to make the change last month after only two members of the public had spoken against it, citing concern about pathogenic organisms in the

air, as well as the possible long-term consequences of the technology.

A nine-member planning commission also approved the ordinance. According to local officials, the effect of the previous ordinance put off all such research in the county, with not a single company applying for a permit to conduct field tests.

Sonya Hammond, director of the University of California Cooperative Extension for Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, called the law "a compromise". She said it resulted

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REASONS

Ripe for release? Hostility to biotechnology has threatened to hit Monterey's agricultural economy.

from more than a year's effort by the extension, the county agricultural commissioner and others, to convince local policy-makers that the technology was both safe and beneficial for society. "You have to work with people to let them understand. Once they understand, they're more comfortable with it," she said.

Hammond worked with the University of California Systemwide Biotechnology Research and Extension Program to organize a conference on the technology last year for agricultural leaders and local officials. The programme focused on the science itself, the future direction of the technology and its potential benefits to Monterey County agriculture.

According to Nutter, county officials have recently felt that a failure to keep up with advances in biotechnology could rob the area of its agricultural base, as companies might choose to go to less hostile locations closer to their markets. The region also is suffering the economic fallout of the closure of the Fort Ord military base. The Monterey Bay Region Futures Network, an organization devoted to developing new economic alternatives, has pinpointed biotechnology as a potential growth opportunity.

The new ordinance is seen as the first step in a long-term plan that could eventually include a joint public-private partnership to develop a major agricultural research institute in the region. Agricultural biotechnology companies also have expressed interest in establishing sites there. **Sally Lehrman**

CERN urged to keep closer control over its staffing costs

Munich. Britain, Germany and Italy joined forces last week to fire a warning shot across the bows of both management and staff at CERN — the European Laboratory for Particle Physics — by voting against a new remuneration package, which gives staff a 0.7 per cent wage rise next year plus various additional benefits.

Although the three countries provide just over half of CERN's budget, the package was nevertheless approved at a meeting of CERN's council, as it required only a simple majority, and CERN's 16 other member states voted in favour (even though some are said to have been sympathetic to the arguments of the three dissenters).

Ken Pounds, chief executive of Britain's Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council, and UK representative to the CERN council, says that by voting against the salary package, the three countries wanted to send a strong message of their concern that staff costs, which eat up half of CERN's total budget, must be strictly controlled.

But, he says, they were not unduly upset by the final outcome of the vote, as they had no desire to undermine the authority of the CERN management, headed by its director general, Christopher Llewellyn Smith, in its negotiations over conditions of service with staff members.

The three countries had pointed out that salaries at CERN are often considerably higher than those at comparable national laboratories in member states. But the CERN staff association counters by pointing out that staff salaries continue to lag behind those of scientists in comparable European organizations, such as the European Space Agency.

But various measures approved last week will have reassured the three countries who voted against the package at the council meeting. For example, there was agreement to recruit more short-term fellows and associate scientists at lower grades in the future, a measure that could be used to keep the total salary bill constant.

The laboratory's council also approved a new associate status for non-member states. This move is designed to encourage wider participation in CERN's SFr2.6-billion (US\$2.2-billion) Large Hadron Collider (LHC) project, whose construction was approved last year. Associate status will allow countries such as Japan, the United States and Russia to participate fully in the LHC project, with a voice in both the planning and running of the project, but without becoming full members of CERN, which wishes to restrict full membership to European states alone. **Alison Abbott**

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