project with the stodgier name of the European Partnership to Promote Alternative Approaches to Animal Testing. More signatures are expected shortly.

The text of the partnership agreement is rather bland, merely committing companies to agree that reduced use of animals in safety testing is a good idea. But it also commits the signatories to develop an action programme aimed at developing alternative methods. The Commission wants this action plan, which will be based on the sharing of information and the joint development of new approaches to testing strategies, to be in place by spring 2006.

It will need to be. Barring last-minute delays, controversial legislation on chemical testing will get its first reading in the European Parliament this week. The proposed Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals (REACH) law would require regulatory approval for all chemicals sold in Europe — including some 30,000 compounds that have been around so long that they've never been registered before. Tests that do not require animals might greatly reduce the costs to industry of obtaining approval.

Scientists at the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods (ECVAM) in northern Italy — which was set up by the European Commission to develop alternatives to animal testing — argue that animal tests are badly flawed. They say the new drive for alternative methods will improve the science of toxicity testing. And public safety demands that the new tests are shown to be better predictors of toxicity than the existing methods.

To this end, ECVAM scientists want chemicals manufacturers to provide more information, including data on compounds that have been tested but not brought to market. Companies are reluctant to share this information for proprietary reasons. But it should be possible to derive shielding arrangements that will enable outside toxicologists to access it, without the release of commercially sensitive information about the products that were tested.

The action plan also calls for the sharing of the compounds themselves. These could be used to compare the efficiency of a new test against existing animal tests. It took ECVAM nearly a year to gather enough compounds to prove the value of its new *in vitro* skin irritation test, for example. The action plan would lead to simple procedures for material transfer that respect industry's concerns over proprietary information.

"Public safety demands that the new tests be shown to be better predictors of toxicity than existing methods."

Perhaps the most difficult point in the action plan concerns its call for the release of more information on the performance of animal tests: how robust, reproducible and relevant are they? The data so far give grounds for concern. Yet industry has been resistant to this.

If the gold standard of animal tests against which new tests are to be compared turns out to be made of tin, the political fallout would be considerable. Public trust in the ability of regulatory authorities and industry to address safety issues would be damaged. But in the interests of a thorough, economically viable and scientifically valid product-safety testing regime, information about the methods used in the past needs to be shared, and fairly investigated. ■

Flu in circulation

An interim US rule on safeguards may not, on its own, be enough to contain the 1918 flu virus.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has published an interim rule placing the reconstructed 1918 flu virus on its list of select agents, and outlining provisions for its safe handling. But these are just the first steps that need to be taken to assure the public that the virus is in safe hands.

The interim rule, which was published in the *Federal Register* on 20 October, means that the virus may be shared with laboratories in the United States that have registered with the agency (see page 134). Some sharing is needed to accelerate progress in understanding its virulence — but it will also increase the risks of an accidental release. The classification of the virus is welcome, although some virologists would argue that it is overdue, given that the existence of the strain was well known months in advance of its publication (T. M. Tumpey *et al. Science* **310**, 77–80; 2005).

The 1918 flu virus is hard to contain and is capable of spreading rapidly between people. The researchers who work with the reconstructed virus point out that current flu vaccines and drugs provide good protection from it — but these are in short supply, and the threat of an accidental release is real.

The risks of such release during the physical shipping of the virus will be reduced if laboratories choose to construct it themselves, on the basis of the published sequence. But that still leaves the risk of an escape from labs that work with it.

The CDC has ruled that enhanced biosafety level 3 laboratories can work with the virus, rejecting calls for a tougher, level-4 requirement that would have restricted the work to a handful of laboratories. That decision seems justifiable, in the interests of rapid research.

But uncertainty continues to cloud the question of access to the virus for laboratories abroad, where the CDC's writ doesn't run. Already, a biosafety level 4 lab in Winnipeg, Canada, has announced plans to reconstruct the virus.

"The CDC has ruled that enhanced biosafety level 3 laboratories can work with the virus. That decision seems justifiable, in the interests of rapid research."

No one will question the motives or the security arrangements at the Canadian lab, but the question of international regulation for this and other reconstructed viruses remains fraught. There is no international regime for the mandatory regulation of virus reconstruction, and it is hard to imagine how one could be put together in the time available.

In 1994, however, the World Health Organization (WHO) brokered an agreement restricting the smallpox virus to just two laboratories across the world. National governments should ask the WHO to examine the need for a broader agreement between member states to oversee the distribution of potentially dangerous, reconstructed viruses such as 1918 flu. ■