

Clinton's doomed technology-development policy

Clinton's timely linkage of environmental protection and economic growth could collapse under the weight of its own misconceived good intentions.

Though the drift of the Clinton administration's policies on environmental technologies is clearer with each passing month, its policy on biotechnological innovations remains opaque. The White House announcement in September that U.S. automakers had signed on to develop radically fuel-efficient cars was the plainest signal yet that this administration is intent on a smart new approach to environmental policy. Its essence is to bypass where possible the traditional snags and inequities of command-and-control regulation with a strategy based on technological innovation and cooperative government-industry ventures, in this instance, a push to build a 65-mile-per-gallon American car.

But where are the government-sponsored research-and-development ventures intended specifically to encourage the innovative technologies the biotech industry has in the pipeline? If anything, the biotechnology industry's experience so far with the White House is a cautionary tale about the probable limitations of this administration's new environmental policies. One after another, potentially promising new environmental technologies are getting silence or short shrift from an administration whose antennae seem more sharply attuned to potential political trouble than to solving problems. By most accounts, Monsanto's (St. Louis, MO) bovine somatotropin (BST) is ready and waiting for approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA, Bethesda, MD). So is Calgene's (Davis, CA) Flav'r Savr tomato and other bioengineered food products. New agricultural products with the potential to significantly reduce the 1 billion tons of chemical pesticides dumped on U.S. crops each year have been expediently ignored and subsumed by interagency jousting.

Even in the growing field of bioremediation, recently highlighted as the second-fastest-growing innovative environmental technology in a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, Washington, DC) report entitled "Cleaning Up

the Nation's Waste Sites: Marketing and Technology Trends," White House policymakers seem curiously insensible of either the problem at hand or the promise of the new technology. The report is revealing. For starters, the market for cleaning up the nation's toxic, hazardous, and radioactive wastes has increased by more than one-third to some \$750 billion over the next 30 years. The figure ballooned in the late 1980s with the recognition that the Department of Energy's (DOE, Washington, DC) nationwide nuclear-weapons network was a vast environmental nightmare that would cost an estimated \$240 billion to clean up. Moreover, DOE officials recognize that the job will not get done without the development of more efficient, less costly new technologies.

With the inclusion of DOE's budget-busting environmental problems, there is a good argument to be made that the nation's number one environmental priority should be ridding itself of several generations of toxic and hazardous wastes. Strategic thinkers in the biotechnology industry should be pushing this view hard, since new biological remediation technologies now under development are poised to play a potentially critical—and profitable—role in getting the job done. Even now, some 42 percent of remedies chosen at Superfund sites are innovative technologies, such as soil vapor extraction (17 percent) and bioremediation (9 percent). Most, like soil vapor extraction, are separation techniques. Bioremediation, like incineration, has the capacity to destroy contaminants. The industry should drive this fact home with federal environmental officials.

The emerging Clinton approach to government-industry cooperation in the environmental area draws on a body of thinking that would eventually relegate end-of-pipe, command-and-control regulation to the last line of defense against environmental depredations. It is, many believe, a way of the future in which economic incentives and growth will be closely linked to environmental

controls. The auto pact will be closely watched as an experimental foray in this direction.

The Clinton instinct to contain political dissension is fated to backfire eventually, however. While it is very much Washington's business to assure consumers of the safety and efficacy of controversial new products, it is not the federal government's job to make judgments about their marketability. Any appearance of doing so will inevitably be construed as a misguided attempt to pick winners and losers that will alienate industry. Already, the Clinton people may be close to dictating which technologies should be used and which should not in the case of the biotechnology industry. It is a serious mistake.

For this reason, the White House would be wise to get off the dime and instruct the FDA to approve BST and Flav'r Savr without further delay, provided they meet prevailing regulatory tests. Clinton must give emerging high-tech companies their heads. If there are going to be political fights, let the melee take place where it should, in the political arena or the marketplace. If new genetically engineered products do not offer consumers sufficient value, it is no skin off of the government's back, as long as they meet rigorous health and safety standards. It is the shareholders of Calgene or Monsanto that will be the wiser for failure. What is important is a tough, smooth-running system for scrutinizing the controversial and potentially useful new technologies, not a guarantee of success for individual products.

The administration must deliver a strong signal that its progressive stance on technology development will not crumble at every sign on the horizon of political controversy. In this respect, the biotechnology industry is a bellwether on environmental policy. Unless the White House gets its message straight, its timely and right-headed linkage of environmental protection and economic growth will collapse under the weight of its own misconceived good intentions. ///