UK holds up applications of genetically modified crops

[LONDON] The British government and life-science companies have agreed a temporary moratorium on the commercialization of genetically modified crops, pending research into their ecological effects.

The moratorium is part of a comprehensive package of measures announced last week that are designed to allay public fears about genetic modification in agriculture.

Under the measures, herbicide-tolerant crops will be withheld from the market for at least a year, and insect-resistant crops for three years, while research is carried out into their impact on biodiversity, for example.

A steering group of scientists will be asked to identify relevant research questions and to plan experiments to answer them. Industry is expected to contribute to the costs of the experiments, which will be monitored by independent experts. Many of the experimental trials will be on a commercial scale.

The government's conservation advisory body, English Nature, will help to set the agenda, and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to play a "constructive role", says a government spokesman.

Michael Meacher, the environment minister, said last week that the government is "right to be cautious" and will "make sure that for every product we have practical evidence on safety before we can take a decision to move to commercialization".

The measures include a review of the use and ecological effects of herbicides and pesticides on genetically modified crops. Companies wanting to grow commercial-scale genetically modified crops must show that there are no adverse ecological effects.

The government wants this requirement to be included in the directive governing the commercial release of genetically modified crops in all other European Union states.

It also plans to set up an 'environmental stakeholders forum', which will allow those with an interest in genetically modified products to have their views taken into account when decisions are made.

The forum is a response to calls for greater public representation on the government's scientific Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, which advises the government on whether or not a genetically modified crop is safe to grow. While this committee will remain science-based, it will consider the forum's views when making recommendations to government.

The government is also to set up a ministerial committee on biotechnology, which will comprise junior ministers from ten government departments.

A government spokesman says that the committee's first tasks will be to set up the forum, and to review the complicated regula-tory structure governing the transfer of genetically modified organisms from the laboratory to the supermarket. One option is a proposal from the Royal Society to set up a single body to oversee the work of the different regulatory advisory committees (see *Nature* **395,** 5; 1998).

The measures have had a mixed response from critics of the government's previous approach to genetically modified crops. These critics, which include environmentalist groups, organic farmers and even English Nature, had opposed the commercial-scale planting of such crops while questions about their ecological impact remain unanswered.

English Nature considers the government's decision to be "wise". Brian Johnson, the body's adviser on genetically modified organisms, says it is good news that industry must demonstrate that genetically modified crops have no adverse ecological impact.

Conservation agencies, he says, have been concerned for a while that the use of genetically modified herbicide-tolerant and insect-resistant crops could greatly reduce weeds and insects on farmland, threatening the survival of several species of farmland birds.

"At the moment, a company is asked simply to state, 'yes' or 'no', whether its genetically modified crop will affect other organisms," says Johnson. He says companies invariably answer 'no' even though there is no proof.

Most environmentalist groups remain critical of the measures, which are unlikely to stop protesters digging up field trials of genetically modified crops (see *Nature* **394,** 608; 1998). Far from limiting genetically modified crops, they say the government's decision to insist on commercial-scale experimental trials amounts to even greater release of a product that most consider to be an environmental pollutant. **Ehsan Masood**

Canada announces second round of infrastructure awards

[MONTREAL] **The Canada Foundation for Innovation last week announced research infrastructure awards worth Can$21.6 million (US$14 million) to help strengthen the country's capability for research and technology development.**

More than 550 researchers at 35 centres will benefit from the awards, which are being made under the Institutional Innovation Funds and Regional/National Facilities, and the Research Development Fund.

This is the second such announcement this year. The first awards, in the foundation's New Opportunities programme, totalled Can$36 million. They were designed to help young researchers in their first academic appointments to obtain facilities (see *Nature* 394, 712; 1998).

There has been an enormous response to competitions for the awards. In the current series, more than 450 applications were submitted by Canadian universities, hospitals and non-profit institutions. The awards targeted key needs in health, science, engineering and the environment.

A striking aspect of the competition was that many institutions submitted joint proposals. "What has surprised us is how people from different disciplines have been eager to work together on projects," says Susanne Fortier, vice-president of research at Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario.

But, for the 159 projects approved after an initial review, even more cooperation is going to be necessary. Because of their complexity, their proposers will be invited to submit revised projects for further review before funding decisions are made in 1999.

David Strangway, president of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, cites as an example proposals from institutions and groups of institutions for what he calls a digital library.

"You have to work out the site licensing with the publishers... to buy a single site licence which can serve all the university libraries. So we're going to have those groups come back to us with a national proposal."

Another complex area was high-performance computing, Strangway said. "We have a lot of proposals from institutions. They will have to show how they are going to provide access to all institutions across the country. There were also outstanding proposals in genome studies."

The detailed strategy for funding these more complex projects will be announced shortly, he said. Phase two will be extremely competitive because projects worth a total of Can$735 million are competing for funding of only Can$370 million. David Spurgeon