

Recombinant DNA

Rifkin's regulatory revivalism runs riot

Washington

AFTER years of relative calm, the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) of the National Institutes of Health has once again been thrust unwillingly into the headlines. It is being sued for approving tests which release DNA organisms without preparing the environmental risk assessment its critics say is required by law. It is being deluged with Freedom of Information Act requests to uncover alleged conflicts of interest within its membership. And it was subjected last week to some sixties-style activism when Jeremy Rifkin, a veteran opponent of genetic engineering, tried without success to have a court open the doors of a closed meeting at which RAC was deciding whether to approve DNA field tests by Cetus Corporation and Biotechnics International.

Rifkin finds the discomfiture of RAC profoundly satisfying. Since 1977, when he wrote an anti-DNA polemic, *Who Should Play God?*, Rifkin has transformed his dislike of genetic engineering into a single-minded crusade in which the techniques of litigation, persuasion and confrontation are freely mixed. Over the years his tactics have changed but his objective remains the same. In an interview last week he said he would not now repeat his notorious disruption of a National Academy of Sciences meeting when his supporters swarmed onto the stage and unfurled a banner equating genetic engineering with Nazi eugenics. But he continues to believe that all genetic engineering — using classical as well as DNA methods — should be stopped because, in some religious sense, it destroys the sacredness of life.

From his base as president of the Foundation on Economic Trends, a non-profit group in Washington and formerly the People's Business Commission, Rifkin has waged a vigorous campaign to portray genetic engineering as an activity that is, in his own words, "outrageous — an attempt to bring order and predictability to living things that have been spontaneous, disorganized and alive". He finances his campaign through lecturing (most often at small religious colleges at \$2,000 a day) and sales of his many books — a hodgepodge of ambitious tracts which try to fuse scientific and social issues in a manner that makes most professional scientists and philosophers wince, but stimulates large sales. *Entropy*, published in 1980, tries to apply the laws of thermodynamics to economic theory and is a bestseller in Japan. *Algeny*, published in May, warns that biotechnologists ("algenists") will alter the

essence of life and try to transform the world into "a perfectly engineered, optimally efficient state".

Because of his awe of the intricacies of nature, Rifkin believes in God, and has succeeded in winning strong support from religious organizations in the United States. In June he persuaded an ecumenical assortment of religious leaders to ask Congress to prohibit experiments that would alter the human germ line (see *Nature* 16 June, p.563). The Church, he says, could become a potent force against genetic engineering because of its huge influence in the United States. Rifkin may also persuade

AIDS research

To review or not to review?

Washington

THE University of California has landed itself in political hot water for insisting that an emergency state appropriation of \$2.9 million for research into acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) be distributed on the basis of peer review rather than to a pre-selected group of university researchers. The legislator who sponsored the appropriation, California State Assembly Speaker Willy Brown, has joined homosexual activist groups in accusing university administrators of bureaucratic foot-dragging and has suggested that the university's actions may have destroyed its chances of receiving future state appropriations for AIDS research. Meanwhile, several faculty members have accused their colleagues of trying to dodge normal peer-review procedures by having approached the legislature directly for the supplemental funding with the understanding that it would be funnelled directly to them.

With \$1.6 million already allocated, and the remainder to be awarded shortly after 15 October, an uneasy truce has emerged. But worries persist over the effect that the incident will have on the touchy relationship between the university, which under the state constitution is guaranteed autonomy, and the legislature, on which it nonetheless depends for funding.

The idea of the emergency state appropriation first came up, according to Brown's office, at meetings last spring with homosexual activist groups who complained that federal funding for AIDS research was inadequate. In late April, Brown met 28 University of California researchers who have been active in AIDS studies and asked them how much additional support they felt was needed. The figure they arrived at — \$2.9 million — represented the differ-

ence between the support that the researchers had requested from the federal National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the amounts they had actually received.

animal welfare organizations to support his cause. Michael Fox, scientific director of the 200,000-member Humane Society, is a fellow plaintiff in Rifkin's suit against RAC. So far Rifkin's criticisms have focused on a limited number of very real issues. Should not RAC have done more to evaluate the impact of new organisms on the environment? Does its membership — which includes scientists employed by biotechnology companies — contain the range of disinterested expertise needed to weigh the ecological impact of field tests using recombinant organisms? And how can the public interest in regulating DNA organisms be balanced against the desire of biotechnology companies to protect proprietary information? Many in Congress and in the scientific community believe these to be questions worth asking. Whether they will support Rifkin's wider agenda — a moratorium, or even prohibition, on all genetic engineering — is a very different matter.

Peter David

The university administration then arranged for a quick review of the researcher's projects by an existing university committee, the Cancer Research Coordinating Committee, which met on 23 June and approved 13 of 18 projects submitted.

A month and a half later, when the budget was finally approved, the problems began in earnest. While Brown began pressuring the university to provide the researchers he met in April with the full support they had requested, the university insisted that a general request for proposals open to all university researchers had to be issued and fully peer-reviewed. Meanwhile, a new university AIDS task force was appointed and several of its members, learning of the political background of the appropriation and Brown's understanding of how it was to be spent, threatened to resign. But after assuring the panel that it would issue an open call for proposals and conduct a full review of them, the university administration persuaded the members to stay.

Although much of the heat has died down, bad feelings continue to surface over the affair. Recently two of the researchers that met Brown in April and who were not awarded the full amount they had requested, publicly turned down the grants. And a member of Brown's staff, arguing that the pre-selected research group had already had their projects peer-reviewed by NIH, said that the \$1.3 million to be awarded in October is simply being "put up on the auction block". She added: "We don't feel it's too much for the university to react to an emergency by bending some of its rules."

Stephen Budiansky