

Creationism

Legal battle in Louisiana

Washington

A MAJOR effort is to begin this week in Louisiana to repeal the state law that since 1981 has required equal time for the teaching of "creation science" and evolution in the public schools. The law immediately became the target of a legal challenge from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which has involved years of legal manoeuvring largely over procedural questions. A similar law enacted in Arkansas was thrown out in 1982 by a federal judge, who ruled it an unconstitutional violation of the separation of church and state.

State legislators who are hoping to take advantage of a new climate that they believe exists in the state following last fall's elections are bringing a repeal motion



this week before the state senate's education committee. According to a head count by ACLU, the motion will be approved by the committee; its chances before the full Senate and House are less certain. Repeal forces note that the man who wrote the original bill was not reelected last year.

They also expect a sympathetic reception from the state's flamboyant new governor, Edwin Edwards. Edwards has launched an initiative to attract the biotechnology industry to the state; a proposal that he has sponsored in the legislature would provide \$25-50 million in matching funds for biotechnology research and development to companies choosing Louisiana as their base. The leaders of the repeal initiative hope to convince Edwards that the creationism law is giving this effort a black eye.

The governor is not, however, expected to come out openly in support of the repeal motion, public sentiments being what they are in conservative Louisiana. And other state officials, including the attorney general, are unabashedly enthusiastic about carrying on the fight in the courts in defence of the equal-time law. Now that the state's supreme court has ruled that the legislature can indeed dictate curriculum to the independent education board, the initial legal skirmishing is over. The way is now open for a federal court to hear the

case on its merits and to deal with ACLU's challenge to the law as a violation of the US constitution's guarantee of separation of church and state. The case is not likely to go to trial before January 1985.

Meanwhile, the state education authorities have decided not to enforce the law, which would force the state to buy new textbooks giving due attention to creationism. **Stephen Budiansky**

Biotechnology

US link for Cambridge venture

THIS week sees the formation of yet another specialist venture capital company in Britain aiming to bring developments in biotechnology to commercial success. Plant Resources Ltd (PRL), set up with £500,000 of capital and backing from various institutional investors and a specialist US venture capital fund, aims to invest not less than £10 million during the next 3 years in plant, animal and environmental technologies.

The company hopes to find a small number of projects — say five or six — that it will then support to profitability. Areas that it singles out for special interest are the use of tissue culture and recombinant DNA technology in plant breeding; the selection and development of specialized beneficial bacteria and fungi for optimizing plant growth; and the development of genetically engineered microorganisms to process organic wastes. The company is also looking at improved methods of animal embryo transfer, sex identification and the disease diagnostics and vaccines market.

The founding director of PRL, Mr Ian Kent, stresses that he will not be in competition with the larger and more established investors in biotechnology. His team will bring its business skills to projects that are at a very early stage of development. By concentrating on a few projects the company will be able to

achieve effective control of the companies it acquires or spawns.

The American connection in the new company is through Plant Resources Venture Fund, of Boston, Massachusetts, whose managing partner Mr Jack Hesse is on the board of PRL. Industry sources seem impressed by the Hesse/Kent partnership. Hesse is best known for his success in turning around the previously declining Twyford Plant Products, and Kent and co-director Robert Love come from FBC Ltd, the joint Boots-Fisons agrochemical operation that was later sold to Schering AG.

The new company is based in Cambridge, conveniently close to the new Agricultural Genetics Company, although the latter would seem to have a built-in advantage — exclusive access to the majority of developments based on research in plant biotechnology carried out by the Agricultural and Food Research Council. But Kent is not perturbed: he sees his competitor next door as a successful commercialization of one arm of civil research but feels there is no shortage of viable technology elsewhere. The problem holding back British biotechnology, says Kent, is a shortage of people able to make a link between discoveries and a viable business plan — and that is where he aims to come in. **Tim Beardsley**

Nature index of biotechnology stocks

12-Month high	12-Month low	Company	Close previous month	Close 30 April	Change
14	10½	Biogen (Switzerland)	13	11¾	-2¼
2	1¾	Bio-Logicals (Canada)	1¾	1¾	+¾
14¾	10⅞	Bio-Response (USA)	11	13⅞	+2⅞
14	10¼	Cetus (USA)	12⅞	12¼	+⅞
10¾	6⅞	Collaborative Research (USA)	8⅞	7	-1⅞
19¾	14¾	Damon (USA)	18⅞	15¾	+2¼
26¼	13	Enzo-Biochem (USA)	17½	16	-1½
10⅞	6⅞	Flow General (USA)	7¾	7	-¾
42¼	31¼	Genentech (USA)	36	35½	-½
10¾	5¾	Genetic Systems (USA)	6½	6⅞	+⅞
17¼	9½	Genex (USA)	13½	12½	-1
23	12¼	Hybritech (USA)	13½	17½	+4
16¼	11½	Molecular Genetics (USA)	14	11½	-2½
15½	10	Monoclonal Antibodies (USA)	11¼	14	+2¾
60¾	45⅞	Novo Industri A/S (Denmark)	48⅞	51¾	+2¾
22¾	16⅞	Pharmacia (Sweden)	18¾	17⅞	-¾

Closing prices are for the last Friday of the month. For over-the-counter stocks, bid price is quoted; for stocks on the American and New York exchanges, the transaction price. *Nature's* weighted index of biotechnology stocks stood at 164 on 30 April, compared with 169 a month earlier. Data from E.F. Hutton, Inc.