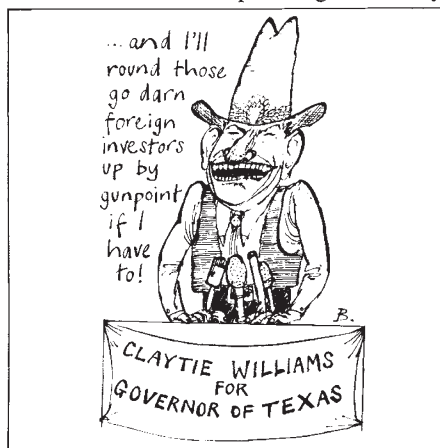


Take your partners . . .

Washington

POLITICAL support for the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC), the planned 50-mile circumference proton-proton collider, is becoming harder to sustain as international partners fail to materialize and projected costs climb, senior congressmen told Department of Energy (DOE) officials last week.

"We're getting a little nervous up here," said Representative Tom Bevill (Democrat, Alabama), chairman of the House of Representatives appropriations energy and water development subcommittee, which oversees DOE's budget. Noting that India's promise of \$50 million — less than one per cent of the project's total cost — is the only solid foreign commitment to the SSC so far, Bevill reminded acting DOE energy research director James Decker of promises made to Congress in previous years that contributions from Japan, West Germany and Italy were near. Earlier this year, White House science adviser D. Allan Bromley told another congressional committee that "major" announcements involving the Soviet Union and Japan might be only



months away. And in testimony last year, DOE mentioned South Korea as a leading candidate for participation.

But Decker said that although DOE was now in the process of putting together an "international plan", the agency has "not moved forward in an aggressive way" on soliciting partners because of uncertainties in the project's cost and configuration.

"I fear congressional support may be eroding on the SSC", said Bill Chappell (Democrat, Florida), a long-time supporter of the project. Congressmen are concerned, he added, that six years after design work on the SSC began, there is still no permanent DOE official in charge of the project. Both Decker and SSC office director Louis Ianiello are holding offices in an acting capacity until permanent officials are named. DOE is currently "considering candidates", for Ianiello's position, says an agency spokesman.

SSC director Roy Schwitters says he takes the congressional criticism "very seriously". But he believes that the level of concern indicates a "strong desire to see the project happen" rather than an attempt to undercut it. Nevertheless, he finds it "inexplicable" that DOE has not responded more quickly to growing congressional discontent. "Everybody's nervous" over the lack of an international plan, he says, adding that there is "a lot of interest from [foreign] scientists but they can do nothing until the US expresses its formal interest in establishing a relationship". Decker said that although a draft international plan has been completed for

GENETIC ENGINEERING

Modified yeast fine for food

London

THE British government is to allow the commercial development of a genetically manipulated strain of bakers' yeast manufactured by the Dutch company Gist-Brocades. This is the first time any country has sanctioned the development of a food product containing a live genetically manipulated organism (GMO). Other European countries, the United States and Japan are also evaluating the yeast's safety.

No genetic material has been added to the yeast from another species, according to Klaus Osinga of Gist-Brocades. The maltose permease and maltase genes from the yeast were combined with new promoters from another strain of the same species, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. The genes and promoters were then spliced back into the yeast genome together with short pieces of 'synthetic' DNA. Osinga says that this DNA contains 'stop' codons, to minimize the chance of any hybrid proteins being produced. The end result is a yeast that should take up and digest maltose more efficiently and release carbon dioxide, which makes bread rise, more quickly.

In its evaluation, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP) says it decided that the yeast was safe mainly because the genetic manipulation was within a single species. For the same reason, and following the advice of the government's Food Advisory Committee, bread made using the yeast will not have to carry a label indicating genetic manipulation.

Gist-Brocades' application was also considered, and approved, by two other committees, one in the Department of the Environment and the other part of the Health and Safety Executive, which advise the government on the environmental release of GMOs. Some escape of

over a year, it must still be approved by several other agencies as well as DOE secretary James Watkins. A DOE spokesman adds that because the plan depends on the specifics of the SSC's cost and configuration, it is in abeyance until DOE can make an estimate of the cost of the project's latest design modifications, a group of changes that includes doubling the energy of the accelerator's injector and increasing the internal diameter of its magnets (see *Nature* 343, 103; 11 January 1990). The process of determining the SSC's new projected cost is expected to be finished by June, but an initial estimate (which would be enough to go ahead with the international plan) could be done by next month.

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the yeast from bakeries is assumed to be inevitable.

But environmental pressure groups have not welcomed the government's decision. Andrew Lees, of Friends of the Earth, also criticizes the secrecy that surrounded the Gist-Brocades application and which prevented any public debate before the consent was given.

The government's Environmental Protection Bill may soon change these procedures. The bill will disband the two separate committees which advise on the release of GMOs and replace them with a single committee under the chairmanship of Professor John Beringer, of the University of Bristol. Beringer hopes that this committee will not operate with "traditional British secrecy", but says that exact provisions for public access are not yet clear.

Environment minister David Trippier has said that the government is "committed to allowing access to information". But the stage during an application at which information is to be released, and the extent of this information, will be decided in only subsequently. Companies may be permitted to withhold information from the public on the grounds of commercial confidentiality.

John Boodle, of British Fermentation Products (BFP), a subsidiary of Gist-Brocades closely involved with the application, says that Gist-Brocades was concerned about commercial confidentiality because a patent for the yeast has been applied for. But he points out that the company nevertheless chose to submit the yeast to the ACNFP for approval, even though it is not a legal requirement. It was only last November that companies or laboratories intending to release GMOs were required by law to notify the Health and Safety Executive (see *Nature* 341, 681 1989).

Peter Aldhus