Summit leaders fail to bridge GM food split

David Dickson

The G8 group of the leaders of the world's largest industrialized nations agreed at their annual meeting last weekend on the need to accelerate the application of a "science-based, rule-based" approach to ensuring food safety — including the regulation of genetically modified (GM) crops.

But the meeting failed to bridge a split over political strategy on handling GM foods. US President Bill Clinton, backed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, argued that their future regulation "should be based on science". In response, Blair was reported to have said that consumers needed "the best science available. You get the real facts, not the prejudices."

In contrast, other members of the European Union called for a more 'precautionary' approach, and a greater involvement of consumer associations and other interest groups in decision-making on the safety of GM foods — neither of which appeal to the US biotechnology industry.

The final communiqué of the three-day meeting, held in the Japanese city of Okinawa, attempted to reach a compromise. The document pledges the support of the G8 leaders to efforts "to achieve greater consensus on how precaution should be applied to food safety in circumstances where available scientific information is incomplete or contradictory".

But, in a further indicator of the split, the meeting failed to endorse a proposal to set up an international forum to assess both the science and the social implications of GM foods. This had been suggested by a number of senior scientists, including John Krebs, head of Britain's Food Standards Agency, at a meeting in Edinburgh earlier this year, organized in response to concerns about GM crops voiced at last year's G8 summit (see *Nature* 404, 112; 2000).

Supporters of the proposed forum had argued that such a body could take its model from the successful operation of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, using the scientific dimensions of the debate as a framework within which to construct a dialogue between participants with widely differing views.

But the United States, keen to limit opposition to its agribiotech industry, is said to have remained firmly opposed to any such initiative. Reflecting this view, a proposal that such a committee be set up by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development was rejected earlier this year.

Similarly, the proposal was merely "noted" in the summit's final communiqué, with the G8 leaders only promising to explore "in consultation with international

organizations and interested bodies including scientific academies" how to integrate "the best scientific knowledge available" into a global consensus on biotechnology.

In the same document, the G8 leaders also welcomed the "nearly complete" mapping of the human genome. They called for "further rapid release of all raw fundamental data on human DNA sequences as such" — thus aligning themselves with the bilateral appeal on the same issue made by Clinton and Blair in March (see *Nature* 404, 324–325; 2000).

In addition, the leaders emphasized "the importance of pursuing the post-genome-sequence research on the basis of multilateral collaboration". And although declining to endorse proposals that are said to have been put to the meeting for a new initiative to harmonize international rules on gene

Odd two out? Clinton and Blair oppose Europe's more 'precautionary' approach to biotechnology.

patenting, they did agree on "the need for a balanced and equitable intellectual property protection for gene-based inventions". ■

UK science plans spending spree

Natasha Loder, London

Information technology, bioinformatics, nanotechnology and post-genomic research are all set for a funding boost from the UK government. They are some of the areas of interest identified by the UK research councils in their bid for a share of the extra spending on science announced last week (*Nature* 406, 225; 2000).

Research council priorities in bids for new money

Cross-council

- Bioinformatics
- Post-genome research
- Advanced computing and 'the Grid'

Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council

- Application of the Grid to Large Hadron Collider
- UK membership of European Southern Observatory*

Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

- Nanotechnology and quantum computing
- Photonics

*This requires the government to fund a separate request for the one-off entry fee

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council

- Functional and structural genomics
- Application of the Grid to accessing and manipulating data generated through genomics
- Nanobiotechnology and bioscience engineering

Medical Research Council

- Application of genomics to human health
- Health of the public

Natural Environment Research Council

- Environmental genomics
- Sustainable land use
- Application of the Grid to climate modelling

Over the next three months, the research councils will battle it out to see how much of these extra funds each will receive. The precise allocation will not be announced until the autumn. Overall, the science budget will grow by more than 4% over the previous year in each of the next three years.

In addition to next year's increase, the government is to provide an extra £50 million (US\$76 million) fund for recruiting and retaining top academics. Although little has yet been announced about how this fund will operate, it might be used to top-up the salaries of high-performing academics in a bid to make their income more internationally competitive, reducing the risks of them leaving the country.

The Association of University Teachers trade union says that it expects payments from the fund to be linked to improvements in management performance. A 23% increase to the stipends of research students has already been announced (*Nature* 406, 113–114; 2000).

The overall settlement has been warmly greeted both by the individual research councils and by the Royal Society. "The broad message is we are very happy," says Bob Ward, manager of the science advice section of the Royal Society. "We were amazed that the government appears to have addressed all the main areas we were worried about."

But universities must still find £1 for every £3 of taxpayers' money invested in research infrastructure — an attempt to encourage them to strengthen their links with business. ■