

Danish study hints at biodiversity boost from transgenic crops

Copenhagen Tentative evidence that some genetically modified crops could benefit biodiversity has emerged from a trial of transgenic beet in Denmark.

Researchers from the National Environmental Research Institute in Silkeborg compared levels of weeds, insects and other animal life in fields of conventional beet with those in a strain that was genetically engineered to be resistant to a glyphosate herbicide. After application of the herbicide, more weeds and insects survived in transgenic beet fields, although beet yields were not cut.

But the study does not prove that genetically engineered crops will not harm the environment, warns Marianne Pedersen, one of the Silkeborg researchers. "One-year positive results may be outweighed by longer-term drawbacks," she says, "because weed in glyphosate-treated sites is killed before it can produce seeds in late summer." Such uncertainties may be cleared up by Britain's farm-scale transgenic beet study, the results of which are due out this year.

Crop trials elsewhere are proceeding less smoothly. Plant scientists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich last week saw a proposed study of transgenic wheat cancelled when the country's highest court ruled that they had not taken environmental objections into consideration.

Public starts to accept use of animal experiments...

London Good news for those advocating the use of animals in medical research — British public opinion may be swinging their way.

UK poll specialists MORI asked whether animal experimentation was always, sometimes or never justified, and scored respondents' answers +1, 0 or -1, respectively. In the case of research on diseases such as AIDS, the average score jumped from 0.08 in 1999 to 0.29 in 2002.

The use of animals in studies of other life-threatening diseases and in basic biological research also gained acceptance, and respondents reported more faith in the



Animal pharm? British opinion may be moving towards using animals for medical research.

Watt's lots of steam

London A selection of James Watt's possessions, from an early photocopier to his description of how he was drawn to steam power by a boyhood observation of his aunt's kettle, are due to be auctioned at Sotheby's in London this week.

Watt's greatest achievement was a steam engine that was four times more powerful than the best of the day. But he also invented an early chemical photocopier, an example of which from 1790 is in the sale, along with his desk, library, telescope, dinner service and a model steam engine (right).

The sale is expected to raise more than £500,000 (US\$800,000). The auction follows the death last year of Lord James Gibson-Watt, the inventor's great-great-grandson.



regulatory system. The survey was commissioned by the Coalition for Medical Progress, an umbrella group of funding agencies, charities and companies involved in medical research.

Some work on communicating with the public still needs to be done. When asked to name an animal most commonly used in experiments, 2% of respondents suggested the horse, whereas 12% argued that the use of bacteria in medical research is unacceptable.

...but activists force hotel to ditch meeting

London Protests from animal-rights activists have forced the cancellation of a major conference for technicians working with laboratory animals.

The Citywest Hotel near Dublin in Ireland cancelled the booking for the Institute of Animal Technology's annual congress, due to be held there next month, after pressure from the campaigners. The institute says that the hotel's decision followed "attacks on its facilities, staff and guests by anonymous animal-rights extremists", although the hotel would not comment.

Some members of the institute are staff at Huntingdon Life Sciences, an animal-testing facility near Cambridge that was targeted for closure by a protest group called Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty. The group's website tells of the campaign against the hotel and now claims victory.

A spokesperson for the institute says that the congress will take place later this year at a different venue.

Plant breeders see benefit of growth in genomics

Munich The ability of the genomics revolution to boost conventional plant breeding is to be explored by science academies from European Union member states.

Transgenic technologies have captured the

bulk of crop-research funds in recent years at a time when many conventional plant-breeding programmes are suffering from cutbacks (see *Nature* 421, 568–570; 2003). But advocates of conventional approaches point out that genetic modification involves the addition of individual genes, whereas conventional breeding can change several traits simultaneously.

Francesco Salamini, a plant scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Plant Breeding Research in Cologne, Germany, says that the use of genomic data could speed up conventional approaches. Researchers must currently grow plants to see if they have acquired a particular trait, but sequence data could reveal the presence of identifiable and easy-to-check genetic markers that are linked to superior versions of useful traits.

Clonaid wins 'snake oil' for clone claims

San Francisco With tongues firmly in cheeks, experts on ageing last week named Clonaid, the company that claims to have cloned humans, as a winner in the second annual Silver Fleece Awards. The prize, a bottle of vegetable oil labelled "snake oil", recognizes the year's most outrageous claims about human ageing.

Clonaid, which was founded in 1997 by a religious sect that believes that aliens populated the Earth through cloning, claims that "cloning will enable mankind to reach eternal life". Many scientists argue that the company's publicity has accelerated a move by Congress to ban all forms of cloning in the United States, despite its medical potential.

Clonaid officials accuse the award's originators, which include Leonard Hayflick, a biologist at the University of California, San Francisco, of lacking vision. A second award went to Urban Nutrition, which markets an anti-ageing potion, called Longevity, on the Internet.