

Turkish law could cripple bioscience

In most countries, molecular biologists can place an order for a particular genetic strain of fly and be working on it within weeks. The same is true in Turkey — for now.

But under a new law approved by the Turkish parliament on 18 March, scientists' access to these laboratory staples could face delays of up to a year, or even be denied.

The legislation was intended to control the use of genetically modified plants in agriculture, in response to popular mistrust of the technology. But it extends to all transgenic organisms, with no exceptions made for those used in research — the law was formulated without consulting molecular biologists on the implications (see *Nature* **463**, 1000; 2010).

After the law comes into effect, in around six months, scientists will have to apply to a new Biosafety Council within the agriculture ministry for approval to import individual strains of any transgenic organism, or to conduct any

experiment involving genetic manipulation. Up to 105 days are allowed for each decision, but scientists fear that the system will quickly become clogged up, causing huge delays. The law also bans the breeding of genetically modified plants and animals.

"I am scared," says fly geneticist Arzu Çelik at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. Three years ago, Çelik won a prestigious European Molecular Biology Organization Installation Grant, which allows young scientists to return to their home country and set up an independent lab there. "We don't know what will happen — according to the law, we won't be able to make the simplest genetic construct," she says.

"It is hard to see how we will be able to do any experiments at all," adds cancer researcher Mehmet Öztürk of Bilkent University in Ankara, whose research uses knockout

mice, in which specific genes are silenced. Creating the mice requires breeding over several generations.

Some are nursing the forlorn hope that Turkey's president will hear scientists' protests and exercise his constitutional right to return the bill to parliament for reconsideration, or that regulations governing how the law is applied will soften the impact for research.

Given that the law is at odds with Turkey's aim of strengthening its biomedical research base, others speculate that it will not be rigorously enforced for researchers. But that assumption could be risky, says plant geneticist Selim Çetiner at Istanbul's Sabanci University, not least because the new law mandates up to 12 years' imprisonment for non-compliance. ■

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