

**DELIBERATE RELEASE REGULATIONS**

# SCOPE OF U.K. PROPOSALS WIDENED

LONDON, U.K.—Scientists proposing to release genetically engineered organisms into the environment soon will be obliged not only to safeguard human health but also to protect the environment from harm. Present arrangements under the Health and Safety at Work Act are designed to minimize hazards to workers and the general public. Now, there will be a complimentary requirement to use “the best available techniques not entailing excessive cost” to avoid damage to ecosystems. Although the Advisory Committee on Genetic Manipulation will continue to advise government departments on gene technology, a new regulatory body will deal specifically with deliberate releases of engineered organisms.

These are the key provisions proposed by the U.K. government in a wide-ranging Environmental Protection Bill that symbolizes the new “green” politics of the Thatcher government. The proposals, which will be debated in Parliament over the coming months and should become law before the end of this year, follow closely recent recommendations by

the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (*Bio/Technology* 7:860, Sept. '89). They have been drafted to ensure safety without hampering science or industry with unnecessary regulation. “This will ensure that biotechnology can continue to develop in a climate of public confidence,” says the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Department of the Environment.

Under the proposals, researchers intending to import, acquire, keep, or release a genetically engineered organism will have to supply a safety assessment and obtain consent accordingly. HSE inspectors, now armed with the broader mandate of environmental protection, will enforce the regulations. As at present, their powers will extend to entering laboratories, and removing and destroying organisms deemed to pose a hazard. But tough new penalties, including a maximum five years' imprisonment, are proposed for scientists who fail to comply with the new rules.

After considerable debate in the biotechnology community, the government has concluded that the new

controls should not apply to techniques that involve only naturally occurring processes of reproduction—including selective breeding techniques and *in vitro* fertilization—or techniques that merely assist such processes. Therefore they will not embrace conventional or animal breeding. They *do* cover the release of organisms made by “any technique for the modification of any genes or other genetic material by the recombination, insertion or deletion of, or of any component parts of, that material from its previously occurring state.” A potential catch-all provision also includes other gene modification techniques to produce organisms “which should...be treated as having been genetically modified.”

The U.K. Genetics Forum, a lobby group that is trying to open up debate about the dangers of genetic manipulation, has welcomed the proposed extension of legislation to cover environmental protection. But the group continues to call for a Public Biotechnology Commission “with representatives from public-interest and environmental groups.” —**Bernard Dixon**

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