

IN brief

Water stress survivors

The European Union granted €9 (\$12.1) million to WatBio, a 5-year project aimed at producing drought-resistant plants for biofuel and bioproducts. The initiative, part of the EU's Seventh Framework Programme, will focus on underutilized non-food crops, including poplar, and two perennial grasses—miscanthus and the giant reed *Arundo*—chosen for their rapid growth and potential in bioenergy and biomass production. The multinational consortium involving 14 academic partners and 7 small and medium-sized enterprises will identify traits and genes related to water use efficiency in the target species. "Arundo is a good biofuel source but its genome is largely unknown and work is starting from scratch," says Francesco Loreto, from the Italian National Research Council, Rome. The development of genomics-enabled breeding for these crops is warranted, according to Stephen Moose from the University of Illinois at Urbana, who is not involved in the effort. But Moose doubts commercially relevant improvements can be achieved without genetic modification, a technique mentioned only as proof of concept in the WatBio project, to avoid controversy. "It would be terrible if once again Europe developed (and funded) the science but did not reap the benefits," says Nathalie Moll, from the association of biotech industries EuropaBio, based in Brussels. "Improving drought resistance could become an essential tool for the forest and pulp and paper industry, particularly in the context of climate change," argues Mats Johnson, CEO of SweTree Technologies in Umea, Sweden, which will assess business opportunities for WatBio poplars.

Anna Meldolesi

IN their words



"Regulators want a lot of pen strokes up and down that provide a much more unique-looking name. It is more readable or interpretable if it has a lot of those letters," said Brannon Cashion, president of

brand consulting firm Addison Whitney of Charlotte, North Carolina, explaining how drug names like Xalkori or Xtandi come into being. (*Reuters*, 25 January 2013)

"The question is, will the orphan drug strategy become a victim of its own success?"

David Pinniger, an investment manager at London's International Biotechnology Trust comments on uniQure of Amsterdam's announcement that their gene therapy, Glybera, will be priced at no less than a million dollars. (*Reuters*, 3 January 2013)

Wyss Institute to rise in Merck Serono shell

Swiss businessman Ernesto Bertarelli, former owner of biotech Serono, is bidding to buy back the Geneva R&D facility that was once the showpiece of his biotech empire and turn it into a life sciences incubator and center for translational medicine.

Bertarelli sold the family-owned Serono to Merck KgaA of Darmstadt, Germany, for \$13.3 billion in 2007. But in April 2012, following a string of failures—notably the decision in June 2011 not to pursue US Food and Drug Administration and European Medicines Agency approval of Movectro (cladribine), a purine analog oral treatment for multiple sclerosis—Merck KgaA announced that it was shutting the Geneva R&D facility, where 1,250 people were employed (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **30**, 569–570, 2012). The brain drain began immediately: by the end of January, 280 employees had accepted the offer to move to another Merck Serono site, with 110 of these going abroad, another 390 finding jobs with other employers and 80 deciding to take early retirement.

At the heart of the new venture will be an institute endowed by fellow Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss and modeled on the Wyss Institute he established at Harvard University. Wyss's foundation will donate CHF125 (\$135) million over six years to the new institute, which is being set up as a public-private partnership in cooperation with École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and the University of Geneva.

A spokesman for EPFL said the institute will complement existing research at the Polytechnique by increasing the rate of technology transfer and "providing a place to mature these technologies." The near-market institute will create ten new labs specializing in fields including immunoengineering, neuroengineering and regenerative medicine, employing 120–150 people.

The spokesman said it is not clear whether new posts will be filled by Merck Serono staff facing the loss of their jobs in mid-2013 when Merck KgaA goes ahead with restructuring plans and ends its R&D activities at the Geneva facility, or by researchers currently employed by EPFL and the University of Geneva, or by new recruits.

On a brighter note for the local biotech cluster, a seed fund set up by Merck to support spin-outs based on R&D carried out at the Geneva facility has backed the formation of five new companies employing 38 staff. These are Prexton Therapeutics, specializing in Parkinson's disease; Quartz Bio, a bioinformatics services provider; and Asceneuron, which is developing Tau-based treatments for Alzheimer's disease.

A spokesman for Bertarelli says the initiative is intended to retain talent and "energize" the future of the biotech sector on the region. "It is our hope that this bid will secure these skills for many years to come and realize a vision for the Lake Geneva region as a continuing home for biotechnology," he adds.

Although the project is "complex," the partners are confident that it can be delivered if they succeed in acquiring the site, Bertarelli's spokesman says. Merck itself declined to comment on the proposal while negotiations on the sale of the R&D site are in progress.

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Merck Serono employees stage a die-in demonstration last summer in Geneva to protest against plans to close the Swiss branch.