RESEARCH CONSORTIA

HOLLAND HOME TO NEW ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP

WAGENINGEN, The Netherlands—The new European Environmental Research Organization (EERO) soon will establish its headquarters on the campus of Wageningen Agricultural University. This reflects a major financial commitment to the new organization made by a consortium that includes Dutch government ministries, research agencies and institutes, RaboBank (Utrecht, The Netherlands), and the Universities of Wageningen and Utrecht. In addition to funding already announced from the German Volkswagen Foundation (*Bio/Technology* 7:1223, Dec. '89), EERO will receive one million guilders (\$530,000) per year for at least five years from the consortium for its efforts in promoting environmental research. Further contributions are earmarked from the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs and the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science.

EERO's choice of Wageningen is also based on the intellectual and material benefits to be gained from a location that already contains one of the heaviest concentrations of scien-

tists in Europe working on issues related to environment and ecology. In addition to the 200 university scientists engaged in environmental problems, Wageningen is close to the National Institute of Public Health and Environmental Protection and 11 of the 17 research institutes of the Dutch Directorate for Agricultural Research. Alexander Zehnder, professor of microbiology at Wageningen Agricultural University, has now succeeded Kenneth Timmis as chairman of the EERO council. The vice-chairman is Ralf Hütter of the ETH Centrum (Zurich, Switzerland).

Modeled on the European Molecular Biology Organization (Heidelberg, F.R.G.), EERO will not fund research directly. The organization has set a budget of 2.5 million ECUs (\$3 million) for the first five years of its work, embracing long- and short-term fellowships, advanced laboratory courses, and workshops. EERO soon will announce the appointment of its first executive secretary.

Two areas highlighted for special attention are: the biotransformation of pollutants in nature, where their

behavior may not reflect that observed under laboratory conditions; and the parameters that determine whether a polluted ecosystem will return to its original state following the disappearance of the pollutant, or whether a qualitatively different population of organisms will establish itself. A third aim is to stimulate research and the spread of expertise on processes—biotechnological or otherwise—that can eliminate pollutants in waste waters, dump sites, and accidentally contaminated environments.

"It is irrational to invest enormous resources in exploring the nature of other planets while the environmental quality of our own is allowed to deteriorate at an increasing rate," says Zehnder. "It is also ironic that Europe, with its elevated population density and high degree of industrialization, has made so little provision to safeguard itself from environmental pollution and has invested such disproportionately small sums in appropriate studies. At the moment, environmental research lags as much as a decade behind medical science."

—Bernard Dixon

FEDERAL AGENCIES

EPA SEEKS HIGH PROFILE FOR BIOREMEDIATION

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Late in February William Reilly, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), reaffirmed his avowed special interest in bioremediation. Surrounded by several top assistant administrators, Reilly presided over a day-long session that brought industry and academic experts together with EPA officials to exchange views and devise an agenda for promoting a biotechnologically based clean-up.

Since EPA officials adopted bioremediation as one means of cleaning the Exxon oil spill on Alaskan beaches last summer (*Bio/Technology* 8:228, Mar. '90, 7:852, Sep. '89), they have repeatedly declared they were seeking ways of stimulating more research and development activity in this area. However, just what EPA plans to do is still far from clear, even to agency officials. Although they refer to the February meeting as "extremely worthwhile" and are promising to "continue the dialogue" with biotechnology companies and academic researchers studying bioremediation, EPA officials are not sure just which recommendations they will follow.

Nonetheless, the meeting participants collectively identified several general areas of concern, according to John Skinner, acting deputy assistant administrator for research and development at EPA. Included are the need to disseminate information about bioremediation to a wide audience, to conduct field tests under "standard protocols," to establish quality standards and possibly "certification programs" for the bioremediation industry, to identify opportunities "to use biotechnology for waste minimization," and to "establish a strong science base to extend the applicability of bioremediation."

Some participants point to another important need—namely to reconcile apparent inconsistencies in current EPA regulations that pose potential obstacles to the use of bioremediation. Several top EPA officials "said they had no idea of inconsistencies in regulations under TSCA [the Toxic Substances Control Act] and RCRA [the Resource Conservation Recovery Act]," points out Pamela Bridgen, executive director of the Association of Biotechnology Companies (Washing-

ton, DC). Even deeper inconsistencies over biotechnology issues may need to be corrected within the agency. EPA's cautious approach to field tests of genetically engineered microorganisms and the struggle to develop workable regulations for such tests under TSCA are examples of policies that send a very different signal to the biotechnology community and that make Reilly sound hypocritical on bioremediation, says one critic.

"Hopefully the forthcoming TSCA rules won't regulate naturally occurring microorganisms," says Katherine Devine of the Applied Biotreatment Association (Washington, DC). For them to do so would be "ridiculous," and could make compliance costs for the industry prohibitive.

Although the scope of EPA's initiative is uncertain, agency officials want to increase the current bioremediation research budget, which amounts to roughly \$5 million per year in internal and extramural programs, in fiscal 1992. Some of the expanded effort will include projects aimed at cleaning Superfund waste sites.

—Jeffrey L. Fox