

## IN brief

## Texas splurges on cancer

Texas doled out the first round of grants from a \$3 billion publicly funded program to boost in-state cancer research. Almost all of the initial \$61 million went to in-state academic institutions like University of Texas, Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine. Two private companies have also received money—InGeneron, a developer of cell separation and diagnostics tools based in Houston, and Visualase, a designer of precision lasers used to ablate brain tumors, also based in Houston. In order to boost the state's private sector, the fund's managing body, the Cancer Prevention & Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT), closed a parallel round of applications in March exclusively for companies. CPRIT hopes the money will foster a fledgling biotech industry, attract top researchers and lure new business to Texas. To show its commitment, the CPRIT states that it will pay half an institutional endowment with "no limit" to draw a senior scientist. The program's chief scientific officer, Alfred Gilman, hopes the granting process will make the state more attractive to venture capitalists. The vetting from CPRIT's review council, made up of directors from the nation's top cancer research centers, "should be a big vote of confidence" for potential investors, he says. CPRIT funded 66 out of 881 applications in its first round. Of the grants, two-thirds had translational components, many in genetics, epigenetics and imaging. "We need to find young entrepreneurial CEOs who are willing to go anywhere to chase good, promising science," Gilman says.

Daniel Grushkin

## IN their words



"After spending \$1.4 billion of shareholders' money, maybe it's best for Cell Therapeutics to return what's left to shareholders and call it a day." David Miller, of Seattle-based Biotech Stock Research, comments

on the company's failure to persuade the US Food and Drug Administration to approve its lymphoma drug, pixantrone, despite burning through a fair amount of investors' cash. (*Xconomy*, 23 March 2010)

"We've been fighting this war on cancer since Nixon's time, but we've only had the human genome for about a decade." Victor Velculescu, co-director of cancer biology at Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center, responds to critical comments that too many people are still dying of the disease. (*Bloomberg*, 16 March 2010)

## Chinese green light for GM rice and maize prompts outcry

Biosafety certificates for genetically modified (GM) rice and maize issued by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture late last year have prompted a protest from over a hundred intellectuals and prominent public officials. This represents one of the most high-profile challenges to China's aggressive policy for the adoption of transgenic crops. Even so, proponents of the technology say that opposition is likely neither to block the path to commercialization of GM rice nor to stall development of an approach that Chinese government officials have long recognized as a key to addressing the country's growing demand for food.

In early March, 120 Chinese scholars—mostly in the areas of humanity and social science—signed a public petition asking the Ministry of Agriculture to withdraw the two safety licenses issued last November. The petition, presented during the annual

plenary meeting of China's legislature, the National People's Congress, was reinforced by a motion from the Zhigong Party, chaired by China's Science Minister Wan Gang. The motion, introduced to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, China's Upper House, urges a cautious approach to GM crop development.

Over the past two decades, China has maintained a positive attitude to the development of GM organisms. Just two years ago, the country invested a colossal \$3.5 billion in its GM seed program, with the intention of becoming a leading international player capable of creating its own GM crops to ensure security of the food supply. Thus far, several locally developed GM crops, including sweet pepper, papaya and poplar, have been approved and are currently sold in the country. *Bacillus thuringiensis* toxin (*Bt*)-producing cotton is also cultivated widely

in China, and the country's own transgenic varieties of rice and maize are likely to follow within several years (*Nat. Biotechnol.* 28, 8, 2010). The safety licenses that triggered the recent outcry were issued for two pest-resistant *Bt* rice varieties (Table 1) developed by Qifa Zhang of Wuhan-based Central China Agricultural University of Huazhong Agricultural University, and a maize expressing phytase developed by Yun-Liu Fan of the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS) that helps livestock digest phosphorus in animal feed (and that also potentially reduces pollution from animal waste).

Such biosafety certificates provide authorization to commence field testing of a new variety; commercial release of a crop can take another five years or more of field trials. In the case of *Bt* rice and phytase maize, the certificates are valid from August 2009 to August



China's homegrown GM rice could soon reach local markets, but critics are voicing strong concerns over the nation's staple crop.