

ABRAC MEETING

USDA PANEL DEBATES ENGINEERED FISH TEST

WASHINGTON, D.C.—The Agricultural Biotechnology Research Advisory Committee (ABRAC) again broached a tangible issue during its meeting in March at U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) headquarters. After considerable debate, the committee recommended approving a request from researchers at Auburn University (Auburn, AL) to test genetically engineered carp in outdoor ponds. Early this year, the committee recommended that researchers at Texas A&M University (College Station) proceed with limited outdoor testing in cattle of a new recombinant DNA-derived vaccine to prevent the disease brucellosis (*Bio/Technology* 7:123, Feb. '89).

The latest recommendation—to grow transgenic fish outside the laboratory—came initially on a very narrow vote. The split in sentiment among committee members reflects not only uneasiness with the scientific underpinnings of the Auburn research project, but also their continuing uncertainty about the mandate of the committee and the role it should play in evaluating biotechnology re-

search proposals. Committee members and USDA staff have been laboring for many months over charter documents that could clarify that mandate (*Bio/Technology* 6:1274, Nov. '88).

Indeed, Alvin Young, who directs the USDA Office of Agricultural Biotechnology, implored the committee to complete its efforts on draft guidelines for field-testing before Orville Bentley, Assistant Secretary for Science and Education, leaves office. "We have a window of opportunity here," Young says. The arrival and "education" of Bentley's replacement (Charles Hess, a dean from the University of California at Davis, who was nominated for the position in March) could further stall the already much-delayed charter document approval process, he warns.

Meanwhile, during the meeting, the committee struggled to find a consensus on the Auburn University transgenic carp research proposal, which was submitted by Rex Dunham and his collaborators. The researchers have endowed young carp with extra activated growth hormone

genes, a change that may enable the fish to grow more efficiently in aquaculture. Testing such fish in outdoor ponds will be useful, and perhaps essential, for realistically evaluating "the inheritance of the trait and growth rate," Dunham contends. Because carp are "social" feeders and thrive in outdoor habitats, such an evaluation would be difficult in a small-scale laboratory setting.

The committee was sympathetic, but its initial vote to approve the outdoor test proposal by a narrow 7:6 margin was not likely to "send a confident message to the Assistant Secretary," Young told ABRAC members. "I'm betwixt and between," said committee member Edward Korwek, an attorney. "I hate to have Auburn be a whipping dog, and I'd like to see the experiment go forward. But from a legal standpoint, [the protocol's] safety needs to be documented. That's the heart of the matter." With Auburn researchers promising to provide additional safety documents to an ABRAC subcommittee, the committee widened its approval vote to 9:2.

—Jeffrey L. Fox

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