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appointment of a successor to David Kessler, who resigned at the beginning of this year as FDA Commissioner, may be delayed until the FDA Reform Bill passes. Any new appointment would require potentially distracting senate hearings.

Officials at the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA; Washington, DC) are also worried that "traffic jams" in Congress may interfere with PDUFA reenactment. Because money will

begin to run out near the end of July, FDA is required to begin sending dismissal notices to most or all of those 600 reviewers, unless PDUFA is reinstated promptly, according to Jeffrey Trehwitt of PhRMA.

The imminent budget crunch is further complicated by the administration's request from earlier this year for a US\$68 million reduction in the allocation of general tax revenues used to fund FDA, and the assumption that the difference would be made up by user

fees. Industry is against this reduction. "FDA needs to keep at least level funding for the user fees to pay for extra reviewers and bring medicinal products to approval faster for use by patients," Trehwitt says. Assuming full public funding continues and user fees are reinstated, the agency may cut another 10 to 16 months from the overall drug review period, saving about an average 2.5 years over pre-PDUFA reviews, he says.

Jeffrey L. Fox

European Plant Biotech Week bids for limelight

In what was the first concerted attempt to garner support for European biotechnology-associated research, scores of laboratories throughout Europe opened their doors to the public last month. European Plant Biotechnology Week (July 7–11) was organized to coincide with the completion and publication of the final report from AMICA, the group of leading plant science researchers that the European Commission (EC; Brussels) appointed to plan and implement the largest-ever European Union (EU) technology project. The project encompassed 130 laboratories across Europe working on 15 multidisciplinary themes over the past three and a half years. The EC contribution to AMICA (Advanced Molecular Initiative in Community Agriculture) was ECU 23 (US\$28) million, with individual laboratories matching that through their own contributions.

AMICA itself was an experiment in "subsidiarity." Following criticism of the cumbersome administration of earlier EU research programs, particularly of slow payment, the EC delegated much of the decision-making powers and budget control to a board of scientists in AMICA steered by Jeff Schell of the Max Planck Institute in Cologne, Germany and Dick Flavell of the John Innes Institute (Norwich, UK).

According to Schell, the idea of European Plant Biotechnology Week was to ensure that people had the chance to "understand that some biotechnology is to the advantage of society and not, as others have suggested, just a sort of negative entity. . . We want to try to encourage the public to understand it." There was no specific part of the AMICA budget set aside for public education programs, but as Flavell explains, the AMICA team saw the "week" as one mechanism for adding value to the purely scientific programs. "It makes much more sense to disseminate information on a broad frontier of plant sciences to the general public than merely disseminating something very specific within a network of researchers. From the very beginning [of AMICA], public information has been

something that we put a lot of effort into."

The week's events were, in the main, untheatrical. Schell's Max Planck Institute offered accompanied tours around its "show garden," giving visitors the opportunity to see transgenic maize and petunias for themselves. There

One way of "fixing" plant biotechnology: Reducing nitrate pollution through understating nodulation.

were seminars, too, entitled "Plants also suffer from stress" and "Research on the snapdragon." The Centro de Biotecnologia Vegetal (IBQF) in Lisbon, the leading plant laboratory in Portugal, was particularly active. It organized a conference, a debate on the risks and advantages of plant biotechnology, an exhibition of field trials for politicians, a discussion on the economic aspects, and an open day. "We have tried to combine the interests of policy makers, ordinary families, and local industries," explains Salome Pais, head of IBQF. "For Portugal, where there is not much biotechnology, I think it is really important that the local companies can come to the laboratory and see what they might implement to help their own businesses. In Scotland, scientists at the Scottish Crop Research Institute near Dundee coordinated harvesting of a crop of strawberries transgenic for a cowpea enzyme that interferes with vine weevil digestion.

Elsewhere—in Bergamo, Italy; Paris; Dublin; Tübingen; Trowbridge, Norwich, Northampton, London (all UK); Wageningen, The Netherlands; Valencia, Spain; and Lausanne, Switzerland—a more standard fare of seminars, posters, workshops, or open days took place.

The staid nature of the events of European Plant Biotechnology Week contrasted markedly with the disruptive, but media-attractive, events created by the fringe environmental and consumer groups that actively oppose some of the products of plant biotechnology. Reaction to products such as the transgenic maize developed by Novartis (Basel, CH) and the transgenic soy beans from Monsanto (St. Louis, MO) has involved direct action—occupation of Nestlé's headquarters in Switzerland and blocking ships arriving with soy beans in Hamburg. Most recently, delegates at the EuropaBio meeting held in Amsterdam at the end of June were prevented from using the main entrance to the RAI congress center by placard-bearing Greenpeace protesters dressed in white biohazard suits and by several tonnes of non-transgenic soy beans that had been dumped in the revolving door. As delegates came in through the back entrance, some wondered whether this was intended as an allegorical allusion to the way transgenic soy had found its way unlabeled in European supermarkets.

European Plant Biotechnology Week was not in any sense a reaction to this kind of adverse publicity, says its organizers. "Industry certainly has something going on right now," says Dick Flavell, "but this is not why AMICA is getting involved." He believes that the scientific community is demonstrating that it can be a force independent of industry, rather than being its apologist. "It is to show that plant biotechnology is also about the things that the scientific community can do. It's not just about industry."

There is, of course, an element of self-interest in creating public interest in plant biotechnology. The next three-year European Union science program ("Framework V") will be decided by the end of 1997. As Dick Flavell conceded, "What the general public, politicians, and industries think about the contributions that this kind of science can make to the future of agriculture will influence what they decide to fund in Framework V."

John Hodgson