

## DELIBERATE RELEASE REGULATIONS

**ROLE FOR PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS DISCUSSED**

OXFORD, U.K.—As the U.K. government prepares to publish legislative proposals concerning the release of genetically engineered organisms into the environment, it is facing calls from prominent biotechnologists for public interest groups to be actively involved in the regulatory process. The government has drafted its forthcoming "Green Bill" in light of the recent report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (*Bio/Technology* 7:756, Aug. '89). Mindful of public opposition to biotechnology elsewhere, particularly in West Germany, many scientists believe that the proposals do not go far enough, and that public confidence will be achieved only when activist groups are able to play a formal role.

"I can see no reason why Friends of the Earth, for example, should not be represented on the Advisory Committee on Genetic Manipulation (ACGM), and every reason why it ought to be there," said David Bishop of Oxford's Institute of Virology recently. Bishop himself has already notified such groups of his experiments with genetically altered baculo-

viruses as biological insecticides, as well as announcing his tests in his local newspaper.

Bishop was speaking during a meeting at St. Catherine's College (Oxford), organized by GB Biotechnology (Oxford) and sponsored by British Bio-technology Ltd. (BBL, Cowley, Oxford) and Oxford Virology (London). He was supported by BBL chairman Brian Richards, who is a member of the ACGM. Richards insisted that the new national Release Committee, which the Royal Commission wants to see grow out of the ACGM's Intentional Introduction Subcommittee, must include public interest representatives. He also warned that last year's baiting of land in southern Belgium with a recombinant vaccine against fox rabies "was done without any appreciation of what public perceptions might be," and said that a moratorium instituted in response to public anxiety could mean death for an entire technology. Another call for public representation in regulation came from Eric Crook, vice-chairman of Oxford Virology. "To exclude this seems to me

a policy of considerable folly," he said. "People must have confidence that the Release Committee is not just a group of enthusiasts."

Opening the conference, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Education and Science, Robert Jackson, warned that "cowboys" in industry or academia could destroy public confidence in biotechnology, and backed the fullest possible disclosure of information to the press and public. "There are obvious lessons from the field of food irradiation, where it's clear that the food industry has not put across the safety arguments at all well," he said.

Concerns about the perceived impact of biotechnology go beyond food and consumer issues, too. Brian Richards cited as an example of media distortion a sober story in *The Daily Telegraph* about the employment implications of screening individuals for disease predisposition. George Poste, president of worldwide R&D for Smith Kline and French (Philadelphia, PA) also noted that topic as one warranting the widest public discussion.

—Bernard Dixon

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