

OPINION

THIS WORKSHOP WORKS

What starts off Japanese, emerges half-Canadian, promises to become Latino, and resides in Baltimore? Nova Scotia sushi with summer salsa on a soft roll? An international thriller in which Yokohama detectives join force with Mounties to ferret out South American drug smugglers operating out of the Baltimore harbor? Or could it be the recently-held Center for Public Issues in Biotechnology (Maryland Biotechnology Institute, University of Maryland) "Workshop in Dealing with Field Test Regulations and Public Acceptance of Engineered Plants and Microbes?"

Yes, that again. The workshop is the brainchild of the genial senior staff scientist Morris Levin, who recently absented himself from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to spend some scholarly time at the University of Maryland Baltimore County Campus (Catonsville). Among other activities, Levin is designing and running workshops and other forums to enlighten select audiences on matters biotechnological.

A funny thing happened on the way to the (first) forum—that is, the first workshop planned for a group from Japan. The participants cancelled at the last minute by means of a tersely worded fax message. The usual "So sorry" sentiments included obscure references to crucial sudden decisions from the Japanese Minister of Agriculture affecting the future of deliberate release experiments in Japan, where a form of engineered microbe-a-phobia rages. Changes in official policy apparently rendered the workshop's promised curriculum on that topic irrelevant. Levin's first class had de-matriculated barely two weeks before the three-day semester was to begin in late March.

Undaunted, Levin looked elsewhere to recruit his first real class. A casual conversation at a meeting directed his search northward, leading to the Canadian connection. Thus, the actual first workshop was reoriented somewhat, with half the participants drawn from Canada. The group of about ten was led by Terry McIntyre, who heads the biotechnology section of the commercial chemicals branch at Environment Canada (Hull, Quebec), which is roughly their equivalent of the EPA. (The remainder included representatives from several U.S. universities, companies, and biotechnology trade groups.) Although McIntyre and several of his colleagues also lectured during the three-day July workshop, they came mainly to get an intensified "snapshot" of the U.S. regulatory scheme for dealing with, and current public attitudes about, the deliberate release of engineered organisms.

The snapshot was jammed with details, particularly of what goes on within EPA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) when regulators evaluate deliberate release proposals. That both USDA and EPA have reviewed several dozen applications and proposals involving genetically engineered organisms suggests a reasonable working system in place. Staff representatives from Capitol Hill were critical of the overall system, however, aiming particularly blistering comments at the moribund interagency Biotechnology Science Coordinating Committee (BSCC). The BSCC was called "a headless monster" as well as the "rescuer that drowned."

Such digression from the usual diplomatic language of Washington-based bureaucrats seemed easier to achieve in Baltimore, barely 40 miles from the capital. The University of Maryland workshop organizers, whose vision of classroom dynamics permitted departures from the lecture format into virtual Socratic free-for-alls, accepted—even encouraged—this form of free speech to promote livelier discussions.

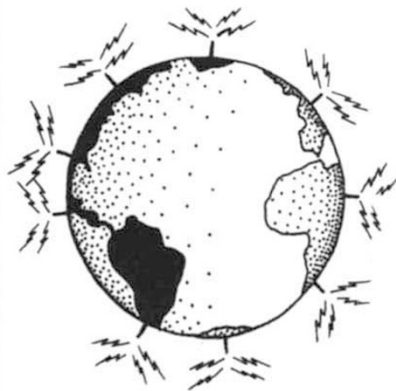
Where is the salsa? Praise for the workshop, whose range of topics apparently is unique, is circulating on the international circuit. A representative from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) recently contacted Levin, asking whether a similar workshop could be arranged for representatives from South American countries interested in biotechnology projects. Their needs are a little different, Levin admits, but the project is plausible, so he anticipates discussions with the UNIDO planners. And maybe, just maybe, the long-lost Japanese class will reappear in earnest to sample this Western fare.

—Jeffrey L. Fox

Jeffrey Fox, a contributing editor to *Bio/Technology*, was an invited speaker at the University of Maryland workshop.

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