

*A CAPITOL IDEA*

## U.S. BIPARTISAN BIOTECH CAUCUS

WASHINGTON, D.C.—On a steaming July afternoon, several members of Congress gamely put white lab coats over their already too-warm business suits, signalling the formation of the congressional Biotechnology Caucus. Because Vice President Dan Quayle's motorcade was being readied nearby, the bipartisan group of Senators and Representatives were gathered at a deferential distance from the steps of the Capitol on a grassy area known fondly as the "Senate swamp." As Quayle sped away amid sirens and the applause of stalwart visitors, the caucus members promised to "promote the U.S. biotechnology industry and preserve America's competitive edge."

The caucus is an informal coalition brought together by four members of Congress: Senators Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Hank Brown (R-CO) and Representatives Tom McMillen (D-MD) and Tom Bliley (R-VA). "The congressional Biotechnology Caucus was formed because protecting and encouraging the U.S. biotechnology in-

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dustry will result in more U.S. jobs and exports, a more abundant and healthier food supply, and an increase in our quality of life," says Sen. Lautenberg. He calls biotechnology one of the "jewels of our economy."

"Industrial strategy' may be a bad word, but we need to find new ways to develop new wealth," adds Rep. McMillen. "Biotechnology is a part of that. Much of the technology is benign, and we want to remove bottlenecks without removing safety factors."

Conspicuously missing from the caucus founders' group were other members of Congress who have been vocal about biotech issues in the recent past, including Sen. Albert Gore (D-TN), Rep. George Brown (D-CA), and other members of Congress whose staffers sometimes call themselves the "clone heads." Also missing were Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) and Rep. Rick Boucher (D-VA), who are jointly sponsoring the Biotechnology Patent Protection Act. So far the caucus is also distanced from a recently formed organization, the Biotechnology Science Policy Forum, whose mission is to raise Congress' awareness of biotechnology processes and products (*Bio/Technology* 9:316, April '91).

The caucus is being greeted warmly by industry. Industrial Biotechnology Association (IBA, Washington, DC) president Richard Godown is "delighted" with the new caucus and says it will "be instrumental to our industry's efforts. IBA enthusiastically applauds its formation." Adds Forrest Anthony, who is president of the Association of Biotechnology Companies (ABC, Washington, DC), "ABC wholeheartedly supports the caucus and will try to work with IBA to give it a chance to succeed. We endorse these pluralistic efforts to promote biotechnology."

Just what the caucus will do remains uncertain, however. Rep. McMillen suggests it might help to "coordinate federal agencies," but also says that it can best "ferment ideas." Sen. Brown says the Bush Administration "will welcome legislative leadership" on biotechnology matters. But, notes Sen. Lautenberg, "We can serve as a clearing-house, and we want to expedite things. It would be presumptuous for us to outline the biotechnology agenda."

—Jeffrey L. Fox

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