

However, although biotechnology companies currently developing AIDS vaccines generally favor the proposals, AlphaVax's Young thinks that it will take a lot more to draw new companies into a field where there's a very real possibility that an experimental AIDS vaccine will fail outright. AIDS vaccine development requires a certain "organizational stomach" for an extremely high-profile, high-risk project, and "A company's leadership has to be willing to commit to this and say they'll get involved," he says. "It's an area that's going to knock the participants around a bit."

In the meantime, Don Francis, president of Vaxgen (Brisbane, CA), the only company with an AIDS vaccine currently in phase III trials, says that if the vaccine is effective, "the assumption is that someone will pay for that, and the corollary to that is that there are not the resources for the parts of the world that need it most. . . a third party will have to take responsibility for that."

It remains to be seen whether the World Bank will assume that role. Official consideration of the task force recommendations will begin after the World Bank/International Monetary Fund general meeting at the end of this month.

Alan Dove

US food labeling policy softens

Late in July, high-level Clinton administration officials met with representatives of an array of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—some highly critical of biotechnology, others staunchly in its favor—to consider once again whether foods derived from genetically modified (GM) crops should be labeled. Officials are playing their own views close to the vest, and both biotech sympathizers and critics interpret this posture to suggest that a subtle shift in policy is afoot. They also agree that concerns over trade, social dynamics, and politics seem to be the driving forces behind this apparent shift. Indeed, the Clinton administration announced in August it might set aside a day for NGO representatives to have their say about issues surrounding GM organisms and labels before the World Trade Organization (WTO; Geneva, Switzerland) meets in Seattle later this year.

The July conclave had been billed, at least in part, as an opportunity for NGO members to learn what position federal officials are considering as they prepare for forthcoming WTO negotiations. However, little dialogue took place between administration officials and NGOs, there was more debate among various NGO factions, and administration officials said little to disclose their own position(s).

In formal terms, US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA, Rockville, MD) labeling policy for biotechnology-derived foods was set forth in 1992 and has not substantially changed. It calls for no special labeling of biotechnology-derived foods. As part of a defense to a lawsuit by activists challenging that FDA policy, administration attorneys recently recapped the rationale underlying it by noting that "there's no scientific basis on which to distinguish foods derived through such technology from other foods" (*Nature Biotechnology* 17, 746, 1999).

However, FDA officials who are now defending that policy in U.S. District Court were missing—or, if present, were conspicuously reticent—during the July meeting. It was attended by high-level representatives from several other federal offices, including the Office of the Vice President, the Council on Environmental Quality, the National Economic Council, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

On the NGO side, during this gathering of perhaps 50 individuals, were representatives from a number of scientific societies, such as the American Society for Microbiology (Washington, DC) and the Institute of Food Technologists (Chicago,

IL), as well as consumer and environmental organizations, such as the Environmental Defense Fund (New York), the Council for Responsible Genetics (Cambridge, MA), and the Consumer Federation of America (Washington, DC).

Despite reluctance to speak on the record about the July meeting and the policy issues surrounding it, the views of those who speculate off the record reflect surprising convergence. Perhaps most importantly, they perceive a "softening" of the current US policy and a move toward a less aggressive posture in the international arena when deliberating over sales and trade of such agricultural com-

Renewed official interest is a recognition of economic and political realities at the international level.

modities. The meeting followed USDA secretary Dan Glickman's biotechnology address in mid-July, during which he said that voluntary labeling of exported foods containing GMOs might be introduced (*Nature Biotechnology* 17, 735, 1999).

To some, this apparent softening looks like a big step away from science-based regulation and toward an embrace of the dreaded social, political, and economic criteria that US regulatory officials repeatedly have repudiated, but which their European counterparts have not. Thus, on the international level, this move could help US negotiators accommodate some of the demands of national trading partners, while on the domestic level the move is seen as pleasing voters with environmentalist sympathies and a growing curiosity about the views on biotechnology held by the next batch of presidential candidates, particularly Vice President Al Gore.

To others, the heightened attention being paid by high-level officials to labeling is not so much a matter of addressing food safety and environmental concerns as it is a recognition of economic and political realities at the international level. Governments in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan are insisting on some form or another of such labeling. Arguments from US farmers about the need to compete in those markets have some persuasive power when matched against the more abstract claims from others that the need to regulate or label agricultural products should be decided solely on the basis of sound science.

Jeffrey L. Fox