guards also be put in place to protect against similar sabotage of crops and farm animals (some observers have speculated that bioterrorism may be to blame for recent outbreaks of foot and mouth virus outbreaks in the UK).

To strengthen such programs, Senators Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) are cosponsoring a bill, the "Public Health Threats and Emergencies Act of 2000," which calls for at least a \$1.4 billion investment in overall readiness programs. Meanwhile, as *Nature Biotechnology* went to press, several bills—including House bill HR 3016, "Amendment to the Antiterrorism and

Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996" and the Senate "Biological and Chemical Weapons Preparedness Act of 2001"—were passed that detail new criminal sanctions and other stringent safeguards against would-be bioterrorists, which will be streamlined and harmonized over the next few weeks. Provisions include measures that could make it difficult, if not impossible, for non-US citizens to conduct biological research involving microorganisms that might be weaponized for use by bioterrorists.

Jeffrey L. Fox, Washington, DC, with additional reporting by Eric Nüiler, San Diego, CA

EU attempts to streamline biotech "vision"

The face-off between European political institutions may threaten the efforts of the European Commission even to set a clear strategic vision for biotechnology and the life sciences, let alone implement it. Despite wide consultation among "stakeholders" in the life sciences, including a meeting held in Brussels at the end of September, consumer and industry representatives remain concerned that good intentions could founder on the rocks of *realpolitik* either within the Commission or between the Commission and the other institutional pillars of the European Union.

The Brussels meeting was part of a consultation exercise to produce "A Strategic Vision" for life science and biotechnology, most of the impetus for which came from the national government of the European Union, the European Council. In Lisbon in March last year, the heads of the national governments set the European Union the task of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world." That was reinforced in February 2001 at the Stockholm Council summit when the Commission, the EU's administrative arm, announced it would produce its "vision" document by the end of 2001 in readiness for the next European Council summit in Barcelona in February 2002.

The September meeting was unusual in that not only did it bring together representatives of science, business, consumers, those with environmental concerns, and others but that also the European Commission presented a collective front. Five of its departments—Health and Consumer Protection, Agriculture, Research, Enterprise, and Environment—were represented at the highest possible level, by the commissioners themselves. In the past, conflicting views within the Commission have often left life science issues unresolved. "It was good to bring all the stakeholders together to think about

strategy moving forwards," comments Martin Frid of the Association of European Consumers (Hultsfred, Sweden). "The Commission seems to be finding ways of

Hugo Schepens, secretary general of Europabio, believes the Brussels meeting signaled a refreshing change in Eurocrats' attitude to biotechnology issues.

talking to people, rather than trying to solve everything from Brussels."

Hugo Schepens, secretary general of Europabio (Brussels, Belgium), the industrial umbrella for large life science companies and national industry associations, also saw scope for optimism. "We are encouraged by the way that our issues are discussed by Byrne, Wallstrom, Liikanen, and Busquin [the Commissioners for Health and Consumer Protection, Environment, Enterprise, and Research, respectively] and their departments. The regulators seem to recognize now that regulation is not only about reigning things in."

It is still not clear, however, precisely how or when the broad consultation will feed into the political process. According to Lars Mitek Pedersen, a senior official from the Secretariat-General (the intra-Commission coordination arm), the Commission will put forward two

documents. The first will be a report representing a synthesis of the consultation exercise, available in mid-January, in time for the next EU summit in Barcelona. A week or two later, the Commission will present its own life science strategy. Pedersen explained that the later report will provide backup and explanation for the earlier synthesis.

Industry is worried about delays to the original end-of-2001 timetable. "It's slippage," says Europabio's Schepens. "The question is, what is behind the slippage?" He says it would be unacceptable, given the Commission's ostensibly collective stance, if the delays were caused by the need to encompass disparate views of different parts of the Commission. Schepens hopes that the Commission may maintain its united front and produce "strongly worded recommendations in action-oriented language, rather than a document of lofty considerations."

However, the real sticking point remains the attitude of the Council. The national environmental ministers' group, the Environment Council, has blocked the approval of genetically modified (GM) plant products since mid-1999. Although a large package of appeasing regulations was introduced in July 2001, with further measure promised on traceability of GM products and liability for environmental damage, there is little sign of the member states shifting their position.

Part of the problem, as Martin Frid of the Swedish Consumer Coalition points out, is that some of the administrative mechanisms described in the legislation do not yet exist in practice. "The European Food Agency has been put forward as a one-stop shop where both scientific and consumer issues [on GM products] can be dealt with," he says. "The problem is the EFA does not exist. Its principles have been discussed but no decision on its location has been made."

The other factor that is likely to limit progress on biotechnology in the EU is the impending power struggle between the EU institutions, the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament. The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, has made resolution of governance issues within the EU a matter of some urgency. Even so, biotechnology may get caught in the crossfire. Lars Mitek Pedersen concedes that the broader political reality constrains what the Commission can do. "If we propose something that is not acceptable [to the Council or European Parliament], this could lead to an institutional impasse, which could lead to a constitutional crisis in Europe."

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