

# BIO/TECHNOLOGY

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# THE FIRST WORD/

## GET ACCREDITED

**T**wo fast cars sped through Brussels at the beginning of October, both far exceeding the liberal Belgian limits on automotive propriety: boy racers with a mission. In one car was the Dutch Foreign Minister, Hans van den Broek; in the other, his French and German counterparts, Roland Dumas and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. New Dutch proposals for a United States of Europe had just been rejected by a meeting of European Community (EC) foreign ministers and each of the speeding parties wished to break its version of events to the world's media first. In the end, the undignified and undiplomatic dash to the podium was a dead-heat. So the Dutch minister and the Franco-German pairing dispensed entirely with protocol and held separate press conferences—simultaneously.

Politicians are often faintly ridiculous, perhaps especially so now as twelve distinct European nation states accelerate their shamble towards some form of unity in 1992. Enacting the ideal of unity in Europe necessitates "harmonisation" through "subsidiarity": decisions agreed upon at a European level have to be transformed into national laws.

Perhaps national bodies in biotechnology have been put off by the need to penetrate European acronyms and to understand another layer of political processes, but they have been too slow in coming to terms with European legislation, as their handling of regulations from the European Commission Environment Directorate (DGXI; Brussels) on genetically manipulated products illustrates (see Shackley and Hodgson, p. 1056). In 1990, the various national biotechnology associations (NBAs) seemed too vexed about matters of national competitiveness and their own credibility as industrial representatives to notice that DGXI was handing down obstructive and conflicting rules. To their credit, the European NBAs do now present a more coherent and voluble front. The multinational companies moved slowly, too. They established the lobbying Senior Advisory Group Biotechnology (SAGB) in 1989, galvanising the activities of other EC Directorates and the NBAs. By then, however, only a rearguard action was possible.

UNCED, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, will give industry the opportunity to repeat, on a global scale, some of the mistakes it has made in developing biotechnology regulations in Europe. Once again, biotechnology may be the unfortunate which just happened to be crossing the road when the environmental bandwagon came through.

Less formally known as "The Earth Summit," UNCED takes place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 1-12, 1992. It is a meeting with a mandate to create an environmentally sound future. Like the European ideals, this sounds high flown, bordering on the overblown. But it is significant. Most of the world's environment ministers will be there. Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl will likely attend. With elections imminent, don't bet against Britain's Prime Minister John Major and U.S. President George Bush either. They will all likely return laden with commitments to both environmental ideals and their attendant details, like biotechnology.

Biotechnology's most likely role is as scapegoat in debates on biodiversity, intellectual property, and environmental damage inflicted by "Western military-industrial complexes." It should also be there as a source of potential solutions to environmental problems—but won't be unless its advocates, including industry bodies, act. Like European harmonisation, UNCED creates a new political process, one beset with jargon and untried machinery. That is not an excuse for inactivity. UNCED's agenda is already set: all statements and policies made in June will be the result of negotiations taking place behind the scenes now and at the final Preparatory Committee for UNCED (PrepCom) in New York in April 1992. To participate then, organisations need to get accredited now\*. That is the only way in which those with a stake in biotechnology can not only say the right things, but in the right place and at the right time.

—John Hodgson

\*To get accredited, organisations must send documentation demonstrating non-profit status, membership, location, and a description of their relevance to the UNCED secretariat. UNCED, B.P. 80, CH-1213 Conches, Switzerland. Tel, +41 22 789 16 76; Fax, +41 22 789 35 36.