BUSINESS AND REGULATORY NEWS

The Lancet in GMO dispute

News that one of the world's leading medical journals, *The Lancet,* planned to publish some of the results on the toxic effects of genetically modified potatoes on rats from Arpad Pusztai, formerly of the Rowett Institute near Aberdeen, has brought a swift reaction both from environmental groups and from the scientific community. A spokesman for Friends of the Earth said that he was "delighted" that Pusztai's work would finally be published in a peer-reviewed journal. "All the politicians, officials, and scientists who tried to rubbish Dr. Pusztai and his work will owe him a sincere and public apology." However, a number of *The Lancet*'s own referees have threatened to "go public" with their concerns unless *The Lancet* makes it clear that several of them had severe misgivings about the paper. One referee said that that the only real conclusion from the paper was that raw potatoes are not very nutritious for rats. Another called it "a shambles." The Royal Society has confirmed that the *Lancet* article contains the same flaws as the data that it had first reviewed (and rejected) in May this year: too few animals were used, diets were uncontrolled, and controls were inadequate or absent (*Nat. Biotechnol. 17*, 207).

Biosafety talks stall again

In Vienna during late September, negotiations over the Biosafety Protocol, which is part of the 1993 international Convention on Biological Diversity, stalled again as a loose alliance of agricultural product–exporting nations insisted that the draft protocol apply only to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and seeds being released into the environment. Called the Miami Group, it consists of the United States, Canada, Australia, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Most other nations want the protocol to apply more broadly to a range of products, including foods and animal feeds, derived from GMOs. The Miami Group is also seeking simplified regulatory procedures governing such exports, including provisions stating that products that have received approval from domestic authorities may be exported without awaiting full regulatory review by importing countries. Protocol negotiations are to resume in Montreal in January 2000.

Business and Regulatory News Briefs written by Emma Dorey, Jeffrey Fox, John Hodgson, KS Jayaraman, and Eric Niiler.

State needs more science

Members of a US National Research Council (NRC; Washington, DC) committee recently attributed some of the current international level discord over GM crops and foods, as well as related disagreements with provisions in the current version of the Biosafety Protocol, to poor planning and a lack of scientific expertise within the US State Department (Washington, DC). These cases were cited as exemplifying systemic weakness on science, technology, and health (STH) issues throughout the department. NRC members called on Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to give "greater attention to the STH dimensions of foreign policy," to reorganize how the department deals with such, and to improve scientific literacy and build awareness of scientific issues among personnel at all levels. These recommendations are detailed in a report prepared by NRC, the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, following a 1998 request for advice from State Department officials.

Biotech booster site

The Alliance for Better Foods has launched a new website providing fact-based information about how biotechnology benefits agriculture and food (www.betterfoods.org). The alliance is a coalition of 26 organizations—including the Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA), the USA Rice Federation, and the American Soybean Association—and the website reflects the perspective of not only the food industry, but also farmers, retailers, and growers.

As well as consumers, the site is aimed at policy makers and regulators who may not be familiar with the history of food biotech—to help remind people that GM food is not new and that the safety processes have been in place for several years, according to Brian Sansoni, GMA senior manager of public policy communications. "Those who put out the misinformation and smear campaigns are sometimes very good at what they do, and are clearly trying to replicate what they did in Europe…it's important to provide a reasonable foundation for good information and a forum for questions and answers," he says.

Sansoni adds that GMA fully supports the current labeling policy setup by FDA. "It's science based and it's quite reasonable in providing truthful, not misleading, information."

GMO roundup

• European consumers demanding GM-free products in the supermarkets are about to be hoisted by their own petards as soybean producers in Brazil attach a significant premium to their own supposedly GM-free crop. Following a court judgment in September, Monsanto (St Louis, MO) must conduct a one-year environmental impact analysis before it can legally sell Roundup Ready soy in Brazil.

• Meanwhile, Brazil's most southern state, Rio Grande do Sul, is trying to stem what appears to be a black market in transgenic seeds flooding in across Brazil's southern border. The primary incentive for using the seed is economic, with farmers reportedly able to save $25–30 per hectare on chemical costs using Roundup Ready varieties. Officials have set up an 800 snitch line, "Dial Transgenics," allowing law abiding nontransgenic farmers to become anonymous informers on their technology-embracing neighbors. The police have been given powers to burn GM crops if they are found. The measures are in support of Brazil's strategic position on soy exports, say officials, which is that the country wants to be able to supply European demand for transgenic-free food.

• Among the latest commercial beneficiaries of the anti-GM mood that has swept through Britain's consumers and supermarkets is the Dundee-based firm, Alchemy Laboratories. The company has produced a device similar to a home pregnancy kit that can detect the *Bacillus thuringiensis* insecticidal protein in soy and maize flour within a few seconds. This means it stands an extremely good chance of detecting the *Bt* protein in organically produced crops that have been treated with *Bt* as a bacterial preparation. The £1 ($1.5) device is based on an immunosorbent assay method. However, it is not quantitative and therefore would not be useful in assessing food containing permitted levels of GM components. Nevertheless, Alchemy claims its test is aimed at farmers, supermarkets, and food manufacturers in order to help them monitor the ingredients that they are processing. Inventor of the test and Alchemy's managing director, Richard Lamotte, was recently awarded the Tayside John Logie Baird award for the test, an award named in honor of the Scottish inventor of the mechanical television scanning system (an innovation, incidentally, that was rapidly superseded by electronic scanning.)