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ENVIRONMENTAL RELEASE

**SENATOR VOWS
NEW LAW**

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Reacting sympathetically to the plight of Montana State University (MSU) researcher Gary Strobel (see *Bio/Technology* 5:1002, Oct. '87), Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) promised, during a hearing in November, to introduce biotech legislation early next year. Baucus, who chairs the Subcommittee on Hazardous Wastes and Toxic Substances, says "this growing and important scientific field" needs "a new, simple regulatory system." However, disagreement over the need for new legislation is still widespread.

Precisely what Sen. Baucus has in mind is not yet clear. But there is little doubt that Strobel's difficulties with federal rules and his seemingly straightforward recommendations for changing them have found a sympathetic ear on Capitol Hill. Strobel's unauthorized tests of a genetically engineered organism to combat Dutch Elm disease were halted.

Strobel says the current rules are "absolutely impossible...to comprehend and follow." Hence, "A single document—a 'constitution of biotechnology'—that is easy to read, rational, and workable" should be developed. He also recommends that "a single lead agency...but no new bureaucracy" be identified to review biotechnology proposals, an idea that harks back to when the National Institutes of Health had sole jurisdiction over rDNA research.

Despite Strobel's appeal, however, considerable resistance to biotech regulatory legislation is coming from several quarters, including federal regulatory officials, industrialists, and public-interest groups. "The diversity of products makes it inappropriate," says John Moore, Assistant Administrator at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), commenting on Strobel's recommendation for a single biotech agency. "If regulation were unified, it might prove more stifling." A USDA official concurs that, "The system may need fine tuning, but we have statutory authority in place."

The public-interest community seems divided over the need for biotechnology legislation. The current federal coordinated framework is a "crazy quilt," says Rebecca Goldberg of the Environmental Defense Fund (Washington, DC). "Some flaws can only be corrected through new biotechnology legislation."

—Jeffrey L. Fox