## NIH Plan Relaxes Recombinant DNA Rules

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) committee approved on 9 September a preliminary proposal that would eliminate federal regulation of recombinant DNA research. The Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee voted 16 to 3 to change the current mandatory restrictions on gene-splicing experiments into voluntary guidelines and to remove penalties for violations. The plan also relaxes restrictions on the special handling of some experimental organisms. NIH has been regulating recombinant DNA research since 1976. The committee's recommendations are expected to be published soon in the *Federal Register* for comment before the group meets again for a final vote in January.

The present proposal, which was originally put forth by David Baltimore of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Allan Campbell of Stanford University, has gone through a series of twists and turns. An NIH working group that reviewed the proposal recommended that the current regulations remain mandatory, but concurred that guidelines on the special handling or "containment" of experimental organisms should be eased. For example, some organisms that can be used now only in P3 containment could be studied in less stringent circumstances under the new plan.

Committee members vigorously debated the question of making the guidelines voluntary, and approved it by a narrow margin in an initial vote. Concerns were expressed about the social and political consequences of the change, but most agreed that past fears about potential hazards of the technology have now dissipated. Since the rules went into effect 5 years ago, only four violations have been cited, and "none of them were really a threat to public health," in the view of committee member William Gartland.

Chairman of the working group Susan Gottesman of NIH said that the final plan "ended up as a conglomerate of proposals." She said that some members may still push for mandatory rules when the committee meets next year.

The proposal also eliminates a requirement that universities organize local committees to oversee gene-splicing experiments. The NIH panelists do not expect that the 200 existing committees will be disbanded.

***—Marjorie Sun***

## IAEA Divided Over Leadership, Israeli Censure

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) seems to have contracted one of the common maladies afflicting organizations of its kind: a chronic immobility brought on by political dissension. The underlying cause of this trouble was the unprovoked attack by one IAEA member (Israel) on another member (Iraq) on 7 June. A more recent manifestation of tension in the IAEA is its inability since June to elect a new leader to replace the retiring director-general, Sigvard Eklund. Optimists say a new chief may be chosen within the next week; others say it will take longer.

The IAEA's prestige was injured earlier this year when Israel destroyed a research reactor in Iraq and claimed that the IAEA was not doing its job well enough to prevent Iraq from building nuclear weapons. The IAEA board of directors met, denied the charge, and responded with a counterthrust. By a vote of 29 to 2, the IAEA board proposed that a general conference this September "strongly condemn" the Israelis and suspend their membership rights. (Israel is a full member, although—unlike Iraq—not a signatory of the Nonproliferation Treaty.) The proposal was submitted by Yugoslavia at Iraq's behest. Only the United States and Canada voted against it. Three abstained.

Eklund and the chief of the IAEA safeguards division took pains to rebut the claims made by various people that Iraq was on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon. Eklund also dismissed Roger Richter, an American inspector at the IAEA, after Richter quit his post to testify before the U.S. Congress that Iraq could have produced weapons without being detected. Having done all this, Eklund prepared to retire.

Since June, the IAEA has been trying to choose Eklund's successor. By one estimate, the members are now approaching the tenth ballot, although it is difficult to know precisely how many votes have been taken, for much of the politicking goes on behind the scenes. According to American and other diplomatic officials in Washington, the stalemate has not been broken on the eve of the latest ballot, scheduled for 14 September.

Most of the votes are divided between Domingo Siazon, a veteran Filippino diplomat in Vienna and spokesman for a group of less developed nations, and Hans Blix, former foreign minister of Sweden, now the second-ranked official in the foreign office in charge of development cooperation. Blix has been put forward as a compromise candidate, replacing the West German, Hans-Hilger Haunschild, whose name has been withdrawn "informally."

According to diplomatic officials, Haunschild ran into trouble with the less developed nations because he was thought to have been responsible in some way for West Germany's decision to sell nuclear processing equipment to South Africa. The Third World opposition alone might not have stopped his candidacy, but according to one observer, the Soviets also objected to having a West German in charge of the IAEA. Like earlier dropouts—a Japanese, a Finn, and a Mexican—Haunschild has been eliminated from the running. Blix is said to have the support of the Americans, the Europeans, and the Soviets. He does not appear to have the backing of some of the smaller nations, and thereby may fail to win the two-thirds vote necessary for election.

Although none of these candidates has a platform as such, American officials say that Siazon is more interested in promoting the sale of nuclear technologies to new buyers, while Blix and Haunschild are more interested in shoring up the safeguards against weapons building.

It is possible that the IAEA will hold its board meeting on 17 September and a general conference on the 21st without the benefit of a new director-general. In that case, Eklund will be asked to carry on the unfinished business of deciding what should be done about Israel's attack on Iraq. The Americans are working overtime to persuade the Iraqis that they should


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soften the terms of the resolution adopted last June. According to one report, the Iraqis are being told that if they demand too much, they will lose the Europeans' support. If they ask for a simple condemnation rather than a vote to expel Israel, they may win general approval.

The European members apparently have not given U.S. officials any clear reading on the role they will play in the debate. One American official says that it would be a great embarrassment even to have the IAEA debate the proposal to expel Israel. Although the American delegation would stand by Israel, officials would find it difficult to say anything in defense of Israel's behavior. It would be far worse if Israel actually were expelled, according to this official, for then the United States would probably fall into a "retaliatory mode" aimed at punishing the IAEA. This would be unfortunate for the United States and for the world. The IAEA is essentially America's creation and the only existing agency whose mission is to control the spread of nuclear weapons technology.—***Eliot Marshall***

## Scientific Family Under Attack in Russia

The persecution of Russian biologist Sergei Kovalev, a founding member of the Moscow civil rights action group, has been extended to the members of his family. His daughter-in-law, computer specialist Tatiana Osipova, was given a 10-year sentence earlier this year for anti-Soviet agitation and last month his son Ivan was arrested. Both Ivan and Tatiana were members of the Moscow civil rights group.

An open letter on behalf of the three members of the Kovalev family has been sent to Linus Pauling by academician Andrei Sakharov from his exile in Gorki. Citing their efforts 20 years ago when each was working in his respective country to limit the testing of nuclear weapons, Sakharov asks Pauling to appeal to world leaders on behalf of the Kovalevs.

Sakharov's letter, which has recently become available, was written on 4 May this year, before Ivan Kovalev's expected arrest. Ivan, an engineer, lost his job after attending his father's trial in 1975. In a statement issued last year after his wife's arrest, Ivan explained that the human rights activities in which he and his wife were engaged were "essentially a manifestation of normal human feelings: compassion, the desire to help a person in need, and a sense of personal responsibility for that which transpires around us. In our country, people are brought to trial for this. Here truth becomes falsehood and helping another human being becomes criminal activity."

***Ivan Kovalev*** Dorothy Hirsch

Ivan's father Sergei Kovalev is nearing the end of his 7-year sentence in labor camp and then faces 3 years in exile, also part of the sentence. Sergei, a physiologist of some distinction, has an open invitation to join the faculty of the Section of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell University. Sakharov called him "a man of great spiritual purity and strength, of unlimited altruism."

—***Nicholas Wade***

## Research Council Supports Mining Rule Changes

A panel of the National Research Council has endorsed some long-standing coal industry complaints about federal strip-mining rules. Placing an equal amount of blame on the federal law of 1977 and the regulations drafted under the Carter Administration, the council says that the current requirements for mine reclamation are inflexible, occasionally unrealistic, and frequently too costly.

The council's report, which focuses on methods for disposal of strip-mining spoil, echoes many of the themes sounded in recent months by Interior Secretary James Watt (*Science*, 15 May, p. 759). It suggests that greater tolerance be provided for the diversity of mining sites, enabling operators to meet environmental requirements in a manner of their own choosing. By prescribing precise methods for disposal of mining spoil, the current rules "have frozen the technology of . . . reclamation practices, preventing coal mine operators from improving their competitiveness," the council says.

Current rules are filled with specific requirements for mining reclamation because Congress did not trust the industry to meet more general objectives, the report notes. The regulators also presumed that the mining industry lacked sufficient technical know-how to create its own means of compliance. The council says that the problem can be overcome by setting up federal technical assistance teams that roam the countryside, teaching mine operators the requisite engineering principles.

Presentations by mining companies evidently convinced the council that some of the current requirements might in certain circumstances cause more environmental problems than they would cure. At the least, they are frequently more burdensome than necessary. The panel suggested that Congress change the strip-mine law in order to permit more balancing of reclamation benefits and costs.

The Office of Surface Mining, which requested the report in April 1980, has already eased some of its enforcement rules, and is considering changes in rules that prevent erosion and limit water pollution from mining operations.

The panel was chaired by Frank Kottlowski, a geologist with the New Mexico Bureau of Mines, and included seven members from universities, two others from state agencies, one federal expert, a consultant, and two mining company officials.

—***R. Jeffrey Smith***