

more politically attractive than Kennedy's. Denton strongly opposed the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems and Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research because, in his opinion, it went beyond its mandate and developed health policy without congressional approval. According to a committee aide, OTA may be a better candidate than the institute because Congress would have closer control over the topics to be examined and over OTA's recommendations. Perhaps equally important to the proposal's passage is that Hatch and Kennedy are both members of OTA's 12-member board. The board reviews OTA's reports before they are released.

At this stage, Hatch hasn't committed himself either way, according to committee aides. Like Denton, Hatch opposes a commission that is selected by the President. He agrees that bioethical issues need public discussion, but questions whether the government should provide the forum. If the labor committee should adopt the Denton or Kennedy proposal, legislators would have to either amend the Kennedy bill, which is now ready for floor action, or offer substitute legislation. —MARJORIE SUN

## Genetically Engineered Plants Get a Green Light

A proposal by the Cetus Madison Corporation to field test plants that have been genetically manipulated to resist some diseases has been given provisional approval by the National Institutes of Health's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC). The committee recommended, at a closed meeting it held on 19 September, that the experiment should be allowed to go ahead if Cetus makes some modifications to its protocol. The recommendation has been sent to Richard Krause, the senior NIH official who must approve RAC's decision.

The committee made no recommendation, however, on another proposed field test of a genetically modified organism planned by BioTechnica International Inc. BioTechnica had applied for permission to test a genetically modified strain of *Rhizobium meliloti* that has shown an en-

hanced ability to fix nitrogen under laboratory conditions. The unmodified organism is currently used to inoculate alfalfa crops. According to David Glass, BioTechnica's director of regulatory affairs, the committee has asked for more information and he said he expects the experiment will be reconsidered at RAC's next meeting.

The two proposals have received considerable public attention in part because a coalition of environmental groups led by Jeremy Rifkin of the Foundation on Economic Trends had sought a court injunction to force RAC to open part of its discussion to the



Jeremy Rifkin

*Claims RAC has conflicts of interest.*

public. The same coalition has also gone to court to block a third field test, an experiment planned by Steven Lindow and his colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley, to see whether frost damage to plants could be reduced by spraying them with genetically altered bacteria (*Science*, 30 September, p. 1355).

NIH has sought to keep its deliberations on the proposals confidential because it wants to encourage industry to submit planned experiments to RAC for review, and is worried that any leak of proprietary information would prompt companies to steer clear of the review process. (Private companies are under no legal obligation to follow NIH's recombinant DNA guidelines.)

Rifkin contends that such secrecy infringes citizens' right to know what potential hazards they are being exposed to. He has now filed a freedom of information request to NIH asking for documents pertaining to the health and safety aspects of the Cetus and BioTechnica proposals, and has also called for a formal investigation of potential conflict of interest on RAC. In a letter to Krause, Rifkin points out

that several RAC members have ties to genetic engineering companies, and contends that "obviously, it is in the self-interest of each of these members to approve each other's company's requests." In fact, the biotechnology industry is so fiercely competitive that many companies would probably look askance at having their proposals reviewed by potential competitors. —COLIN NORMAN

## Kerr Puts USSR Off Limits to Los Alamos Scientists

In response to the shooting down of a Korean airliner by a Soviet fighter plane, Los Alamos National Laboratory director Donald M. Kerr has banned all official travel by lab employees to the U.S.S.R. A Los Alamos spokesman says the action is believed to be without precedent.

Although Los Alamos scientists are not in the habit of shuttling back and forth between the United States and the Soviet Union, several serve on official U.S.-U.S.S.R. exchange programs. According to a statement put out by the lab, the ban will immediately affect four staff members scheduled to visit the Soviet Union for unspecified purposes. —COLIN NORMAN

## VA Endorses Right to Die

The Veterans Administration has adopted a new policy which would allow terminally ill patients in its 172 hospitals to die rather than undergo life-prolonging resuscitation when vital systems fail.

The decision reverses a 1979 order which forbade doctors to issue formal "do not resuscitate"—or "no code"—orders. The new policy is based on recommendations by the President's ethics commission and brings the VA in line with the thinking of professional medical groups.

The policy states that the decision not to resuscitate must have the concurrence of the patient, the attending physicians, and either a family member or a disinterested third party. If the patient is comatose or otherwise incompetent, the decision can be made by a surrogate. —CONSTANCE HOLDEN