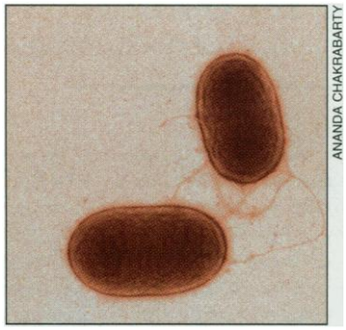
edited by RICHARD STONE

EPA to Spell Out Biotech Regs

Scientists have engineered dozens of microbes to munch PCBs, crude oil, and other toxic substances, but they haven't had much success in commercializing the bugs. The problem is the ambiguity of federal regulations, stemming from confusion over which agency has the authority to write the rules. Now that hurdle is about to disappear: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is expected to publish a proposed rule that clarifies which genetically engineered microorganisms fall under its regulatory purview.

The new rule will be welcome news to University of Illinois microbiologist Ananda Chakrabarty, who chose to go to Kuwait to test a microbial surfactant engineered to degrade oil rather than put it through uncertain regulatory paces at home. EPA's guidelines "have been kind of fuzzy," he says. "It's one of the major problems we face in environmental biotechnology."



ANANDA CHAKRABARTY

Green light. EPA rule should clear path for testing biotech bugs, such as this dioxin-degrading bacterium.

Under the proposed rule, anybody "intending to manufacture or process" an intergeneric microbe—meaning a bug bred by combining genetic material from organisms in different genera—must submit notice to EPA at least 90 days in advance. EPA would then determine if the microbe would "present an unreasonable risk to human health or the environment." Researchers will have a head start if they can show the new microbes are able "to substitute for traditional chemicals that may pose greater risks to health and the environment," says EPA administrator Carol Browner.

Researchers welcome this approach. "If they don't say no, I go ahead and use my organism. That's a very positive thing that EPA has taken upon itself," Chakrabarty says.

The rule also would require academic scientists to notify EPA about research on genetically modified microbes. However, such bugs would be exempt from regulation "if they are tested in contained structures such as laboratories and greenhouses." The rule, once issued, will be available on the Internet by accessing EPA's gopher server. The address: gopher.epa.gov.

DoD Gives In on Breast Cancer Grants

Several breast cancer researchers in New York have dodged the first bullet in a shoot-out between their university and the U.S. military. Last week, the Defense Department (DoD) backed off on its earlier threat to cancel grants to three scientists at the State University of New York (SUNY) after the university system implemented a statewide policy restricting recruiters' access to campus because of the military's policies toward homosexuals. But DoD says it may still terminate the grants if SUNY doesn't change its recruiting policy.

The brouhaha began in July, when the U.S. Army Medical Research, Development, Acquisition, and Logistics Command warned SUNY officials that it intended to cancel four grants totalling $2.45 million to scientists at two campuses—Buffalo and Stony Brook—under a 1973 law that prevents DoD from providing research funding to any university that bars its recruiters (*Science*, 12 August, p. 865).

Last week, however, the Army changed its mind. "They are going to get their grants," confirms spokesman Charles Dacey. However, he says DoD is considering adding language to the contracts that would allow it to terminate the grants if SUNY's policies are deemed unduly restrictive. School officials say they are expecting a visit from DoD officials to examine the facilities for its recruiters, but Dacey could not confirm that a visit is planned.

In the meantime, the affected scientists are plunging ahead with their research. Quips SUNY-Buffalo biochemist David Lawrence, a recipient of one grant, "I plan to see how fast I can spend $800,000."

White House to Honor Science Mentors

If you know any scientists who devote part of their time to helping minority students succeed, now may be the time to give them credit where credit is due. This fall, the National Science Foundation (NSF) intends to solicit nominations for a new presidential award to honor minority mentors.

The annual awards, mentioned briefly in last month's White House statement on science (*Science*, 5 August, p. 731), are intended to encourage universities and other institutions to diversify the pool of talent from which the next generation of scientists will come. But only those who have labored long and hard in the trenches need apply. "We're looking for results, for demonstrated effectiveness over many years in bringing more minority students into science, mathematics, and engineering," says Luther Williams, assistant NSF director for education and human resources and head of an interagency committee that will administer the program. "We're not interested in people who are only starting to think about the problem." The two dozen or so winners are expected to be honored at a White House ceremony sometime next year.

NIH Readies for Round Two on Pricing Clause

Six weeks ago, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) held a public forum to discuss the "reasonable pricing clause" in every cooperative research agreement between an NIH scientist and a drug company (*Science*, 29 July, p. 598). The near-unanimous verdict of the biomedical community was to dump the clause. Now, however, in a move that is raising industry's hackles, NIH has scheduled a second meeting on the topic for next week.

The pricing clause is intended to prevent firms from earning excessive profits on drugs developed in part with federal funds. But industry officials say they have avoided many potential collaborations out of fear they will not be free to set the price of any resulting drug or device.

In announcing the meeting on 8 September, NIH said only that it was looking for more public comment on the issue. "We do not feel we got enough consumer input from the initial forum," says Sandy Chamblee, acting deputy NIH director for science policy and technology transfer. But some companies see a hidden agenda. Genzyme's Lisa Raines, for example, says she's worried that some federal officials want to retain the clause and that the meeting will be used to overturn the consensus reached in July.

That's the hope of consumer activists. They say the first meeting was stacked with industry reps and that NIH shouldn't be allowed to walk away from the issue. "If NIH doesn't want to negotiate and administer the clause, then it should be done by another office within the department [of Health and Human Services]," says Jamie Love of the Taxpayer Assets Project.

A second meeting may not satisfy legislators who have criticized past NIH actions in this area. "We don't find acceptable a change that simply removes the language," says an aide to Representative Ron Wyden (D–OR).