Regulatory Uproar

■ When President Bush announced a "90-day moratorium" on new regulations in his State of the Union address last month, the goal was straightforward: to make U.S. industry more competitive. But dismayed biotechnology industry leaders are saying that, for them, it could have just the opposite effect. And even as they are seeking a special exemption to the edict, officials at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are mounting a quiet rebellion of their own.

Industry analysts believe that new federal rules for biopesticides would limit the proliferation of duplicative state and local regulatory reviews, making it easier to bring products to market. But the rules have been stalled by the moratorium. One federal regulatory official is complaining that Bush's action is a triumph of election-year politics designed to placate restive conservative voters in the New Hampshire primary.

But the Administration must now make the president's pledge appear consistent with policy, which could prove to be difficult. Industrial Biotechnology Association president Richard Godown says that he's already obtained a pledge from a member of the White House Council on Competitiveness to get the biopesticide rules out within a matter of weeks. EPA's beefs go even further: Director William Reilly informed the White House last week that it would be illegal to delay a number of regulations, including those under the Clean Air Act, because the legislation doesn't permit any holdups. Further confrontation between EPA and the White House now seems imminent. Stay tuned.

Defense Software Plan Calls for Bigger Budgets to Ensure Future Savings

■ A draft "strategic plan" for Department of Defense (DOD) software technology promises reduced development costs and improved quality over the next 15 years—if DOD launches a major initiative and doubles its software R&D budget.

The new strategy targets three major goals: cutting the unit cost of software in half by 2007, slashing the instances of defective software and program bugs by a factor of ten, and developing advanced software to improve military "mission capability." Without a new plan, DOD estimates that its software costs—now roughly 10% of the defense budget—could nearly double over the next 15 years.

To meet its goals, the draft report stresses the importance of improving the modularity and flexibility of software via techniques such as "metaprogramming." It also outlines intensive research plans in a number of areas such as artificial intelligence and human-computer interaction. Paying for this aggressive program will require increasing the DOD software research and technology budget from its current level of $195 million to $410 million by 1997, the report states.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Advanced military software could double in price without a new plan for development.

To attract support for its plan, DOD has mailed more than 2000 copies of the document to software specialists in industry and academia. The department clearly hopes the new plan will avoid the fate of another document—the even more ambitious 1990 Software Master Plan, which never made it out of the draft stage.

No Trial to Come in Florida Dentist Case

■ Fans of big legal clashes, get ready for disappointment. The case of the Florida dentist (*Science*, 24 January, p. 392)—a lawsuit featuring controversies over the polymerase chain reaction, the transmission of HIV, and the ethics of writing a scientific paper with data obtained from a government agency via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)—won't be going to trial on 30 March, or any time thereafter.

Richard Driskill, a 31-year-old citrus worker who claimed he had been infected with HIV by Florida dentist David Acer, accepted an undisclosed settlement from the insurance company CIGNA Dental Health of Florida last Friday. Driskill had sought $15 million from the company, basing his claim in part upon a PCR analysis of his and Acer's viruses by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that tended to support his contention. In turn, CIGNA commissioned its own analysis challenging the CDC study—one partly based on unpublished laboratory data obtained from CDC scientists through the FOIA. Both studies have since been submitted for publication.

Driskill's case may have been settled, but the questions it has raised are still wide open. The debate will likely escalate if and when the competing papers are published.

SDI "Supercapacitors" to See Civilian Application

■ A spinoff from the Strategic Defense Initiative—a high-performance "supercapacitor"—may soon get a second life as a key element in electric-powered vehicles.

Like ordinary capacitors, supercapacitors store energy in an electric field between two oppositely charged plates. Recent advances in materials and design have boosted the storage capacity of these devices by several orders of magnitude, allowing the new supercapacitors to deliver large, quick pulses of energy on demand. One such device developed by the Pinnacle Research Institute, Inc. in Los Gatos, California, consists of plates that are made of a porous material something like a metal sponge, providing an actual surface area 100,000 times greater than the plate's two-dimensional surface.

Initially conceived as devices capable of providing large bursts of driving energy for orbital lasers, supercapacitors may find a more practical use in electric vehicles, says one Department of Energy (DOE) official. In conjunction with a standard battery, a supercapacitor could provide sudden bursts of power needed during acceleration, thereby extending battery life more than 400-fold. "Emerging supercapacitor technology is one of the most promising means of supplying electric vehicle acceleration power," says Edward Dowgiallo, a program manager for DOE's electric vehicle battery research and development.

PINNACLE RESEARCH INSTITUTE, INC.

Two Pinnacle Research supercapacitors.

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