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Melaka to invest \$3mn annually to develop biotechnology

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Asia-Pacific

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The Melaka state government in Malaysia has announced that it will provide about \$3 million annually to develop biotechnology-based products in the state. The Chief Minister of Melaka Datuk Mohd Ali Rustam said, "Of this, \$2.2 million is for administration while another \$0.6 million is for product manufacturing." "We (the state government) see this (allocation) as beneficial (to us) and we expect the number will increase next year depending on the returns we derive from it," he informed at the signing of a MoU between Melaka Biotech Holdings Sdn Bhd (Melaka Biotech) and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL). This MoU will foster co-operation among the two parties in skills development, research and development facilities in biotechnology and using Melaka Biotech's expertise in UniKL's academic system.

As for the Institut Bioteknologi Melaka at Bandar MITC in Ayer Keroh, Mohd Ali said the Melaka state government had so far invested more than RM11 million at the institute and had also appointed biotechnology experts and implemented three joint-venture biotechnology-based projects. The three projects are in seaweed farming in Jasin, the development of bio-informatic applications and manufacture of oil essences costing \$0.8 million.

The managing director of Melaka Biotech, Prof. Dr Faridah Habib Shah, said her company had not estimated the returns from the projects because they were relatively new. "We have been in the industry for just one-and-a-half year. We need to build up our facilities and relationship with investors first before we can think of the potential returns as we are still in the process of building up the facilities and investor relationship," she explained.

Melaka Biotech has so far identified 10 potential products to be commercialized, including herbs like misai kuching, halia bara and kacip fatimah. The Melaka state government has provided 25-acre area for seaweed farming at Jasin and another 10 acres for herbs cultivation at the Selandar Agricultural Park.

Source: www.bic.org.my

NZBio disappointed at government decision to ratify Cartagena protocol

New Zealand Biotech Industry Organization (NZBio) has expressed its disappointment on the government's decision to ratify the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. The Protocol seeks to regulate international trade of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs).

"NZBio believes the government has been premature in deciding to ratify because of the uncertainties the Protocol presents and that the decision will have a negative impact on the economy," said Brian Ward, CEO of the biotechnology industry

organizations.

He noted that ratifying the Cartagena Protocol would place a significant burden on New Zealand's exporters, who will now face the additional costs of complying with documentation requirements relating to the export of LMOs. It also creates a disincentive to develop innovative technologies in New Zealand and will impact on the development of novel solutions for the agricultural, medical and research sectors.

He further observed that the decision to ratify is an unnecessary hurdle for an emerging industry that is a key platform for the future growth of the economy.

Source: www.nzbio.org.nz

South Korean health institute to open office at Glasgow

The Korea Health Industry Development Institute (KHIDI) has announced the establishment of an office at the West of Scotland Science Park in Glasgow. It will help manage a multi-million investment in Scottish drug development research projects.

KHIDI, on behalf of the South Korean government and its industry partners, is looking to invest up to \$25 million in Scottish projects over the next nine years.

This is invested through the International Collaborative Research Program for Drug Development. Scotland is the first in line to take full advantage of working with South Korean life sciences companies through this initiative, with a number of Scottish organizations having recently submitted research proposals for 2004-2005. The successful Scottish research project bids will be announced in November.

This initiative builds on the work of the Korean-Scotland BioAlliance, which has held two symposiums in Seoul and has seen numerous business developments visits to Scotland by Korean pharmaceutical and life sciences companies.

The latest BioSymposium took place earlier this year with five Scottish companies (Encap, ExpressOn, Hannah Interactions, Haptogen and Quintiles) and four universities (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde) attending. Representatives from Korean companies such as LG, CJ, Hwail, Daewoong, Crystal Genomics and Hyundai Pharmaceutical visited Scotland in July to meet Scottish companies and universities, many of which are expected to revisit South Korea in October.

Source: www.scottish-enterprise.com

Europe

BIA hails government moves to investigate fundraising in the UK

The BioIndustry Association (BIA) hailed the government's confirmation that it is to investigate the fundraising difficulties experienced by the UK's bioscience sector in comparison to regimes elsewhere. The BIA also welcomed the involvement of Paul Myners (Chairman of M&S) who brings valuable fresh thinking to an undeniably complicated and sensitive issue.

In 2002, European bioscience companies raised Euro1.98 billion, about half the 2001 total. By comparison their US peers raised almost 3.4 times as much as their European peers. At the same time valuations of bioscience companies listed on public markets also declined across the globe.

Commenting on the issue Aisling Burnand, chief executive, BIA said, "One of the recommendations included in Bioscience 2015, the most significant report into the UK's bioscience sector was a relaxation of the pre-emption guidelines. The involvement of a fresh pair of eyes in the form of Paul Myners is therefore excellent news. He is someone who understands the perspective of both companies and investors."

"UK biotechnology companies are unfairly hampered when one looks to, for example, the US. Companies in the US enjoy greater flexibility in raising new equity capital and listed companies may issue new shares for cash in amounts of up to at least 20 percent of their share capital at a discount to the market price without needing to obtain shareholder consent. Bioscience is a global business and therefore we believe that it is important that there is a level playing field financially for bioscience companies," he added.

There are particular circumstances applying to the fundraising difficulties being faced by the UK's bioscience sector. Financial demands on bioscience are enormous with very heavy capital requirements before companies can become very profitable. The top 10 US bioscience companies with market capitalization of up to \$70 billion needed to raise \$700 million from investors

before ever reaching profitability.

Aisling Burnand noted, "We do appreciate the sensitivities involved in reviewing pre-emption rights and wish to work in partnership with the government and other interested parties to see if progress can be made. The government has greatly invested in the UK science. That public policy investment needs a level playing field in financial terms, otherwise the support will not bear fruit. Bioscience is a sector that requires long development periods that, in turn, require regular injections of cash. If these injections are not made, the economic and healthcare benefits offered by the bioscience sector will not be delivered. When it comes to pre-emption rights, one size does not fit all."

Source: www.bioindustry.org

GTI projects strengthen ties with bioscience

A £4.5 million project to boost Scotland's growing reputation as a pioneer in life science research and development has been launched by The Scottish Centre for Genomic Technology and Informatics (GTI). This funding follows Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian's announcement of a land purchase to allow site preparation for a \$280 million Centre for Biomedical Research at Little France.

The funding will help GTI provide, support and backing for commercial businesses developing products and services for use within the bio-medical science community, promote knowledge transfer to industry and the wider professional community, increase interaction between academia and commerce assist development of concepts for new company creation. The funding includes contributions from SE Edinburgh and Lothian, European ERDF aid, the University of Edinburgh and commercial sources. It will encourage commercial research to mix with academic expertise and clinical practice.

Source: www.scottish-enterprise.com

EC allows sale of GM maize in member states

The European Commission withdrew from its agenda the proposal to establish labelling thresholds for trace amounts of EU approved GM seed in conventional seed. At the same time, the Commission moved forward in approving the addition of 17 GM maize varieties to the EU Common Seed Catalogue, allowing the sale of these varieties in all 25 EU member states.

"It is regrettable that, once again, the Commission has chosen to ignore its responsibility to establish a common European legal basis for the setting of thresholds for trace levels of GM seed in conventional seed. EuropaBio and other stakeholders are disappointed, having worked with the Commission for over five years to establish practical and workable thresholds," said Simon Barber, director of PBU, EuropaBio. "It is economically unsustainable and will unnecessarily harm the competitiveness of the European industry and its customers, the European farmers community".

"However, we do welcome the Commission's addition of 17 approved GM maize varieties to the European Common Seed Catalogue, allowing more of Europe's farmers to see for themselves the farm level and environmental benefits of this technology. Absolute purity is just not possible in the production of seeds, and time and again, the seed industry and farmers in Europe face extraordinary legal uncertainty because the Commission has not been able to agree on practical and workable thresholds. To allow for the present situation of unrealistic, unclear and legally disputable national legislation to remain is irresponsible," added Simon Barber.

"It's ironic that farmers may legally grow fields of GM crops, yet thresholds for trace levels of these in seed have not been established. Hence EuropaBio has urged the Commission to fill this gap in the European GM regulatory package by establishing clear, practical and workable thresholds, as a matter of priority."

Source: www.europabio.org

Fresh thrust to agribiotech in Europe

For the first time since its establishment, the Agricultural Biotechnology International Conference (ABIC 2004) was held outside Canada. This premier conference on agricultural biotechnology was held in Cologne, Germany under the slogan "AgBiotech goes Europe" from September 12-15, 2004.

This conference was aimed to bring AgBiotech back to Europe. As it came in a year when the European Union has lifted its five-year moratorium on new GM foods and for the first time, approved a GM seed variety for planting throughout the EU

territory. With the implementation of new European regulations and a more competitive European market, the conference gave new impulses to the European AgBiotech research and AgBiotech business in Europe.

The conference was attended by more than 700 delegates, which covered a wide range of topics like the role and importance of ethics for agri biotechnology in Europe; Controlling expression in transgenics; Plant as green factories; Co-existence of transgenic and non transgenic crops; Synergies between breeding and biotechnology; Biotechnology and food security for the resource poor; Improvement in non food crops; Nutraceuticals as links between food and health: using biotechnology to improve our food; etc.

The Agricultural Biotechnology International Conference was set up in Canada in 1996 by the ABIC Foundation, where scientists, industrial managers, investors and policy makers come together for an intensive exchange of experience in order to give new momentum to further the development of agricultural biotechnology. This unique global forum has been created for the discussion of results from research and development in order to enable co-operation between academic research institutes and partners from industry so that the transfer of laboratory results to industrial scale may be accelerated.

America

BIO applauds New Jersey Governor's backing on stem cell research

Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) has admired the advocacy of New Jersey Governor McGreevey on stem cell research. The powerful properties of embryonic stem cells consistently demonstrated in peer-reviewed studies have generated excitement in the scientific community. Researchers have long believed that stem cell research could help develop treatments and cures for debilitating conditions such as cancer, spinal cord injury, and diabetes.

"The private sector has made enormous progress in this field since the isolation of the human embryonic stem cell in 1998. But federal funding, through the NIH, will accelerate the pace of discovery and lead to cures and treatments for patients sooner.

"Current federal restrictions are stifling stem cell research in the US. BIO urges removal of the restrictions, along with the creation of guidelines to provide an ethical framework for the research," noted Michael Werner, chief of policy, BIO.

Source: <http://www.bio.org>

BCO announces inaugural public policy forum

The Biotechnology Council of Ontario (BCO) will host a major provincial Public Policy Forum in Toronto during October. The Forum will bring together organizations and individuals from across the biotechnology sector to define strategic policies for this critical economic area of the province.

The BCO's Public Policy Forum will be a full-day open discussion on the needs, challenges, and advantages of the biotechnology sector in Ontario. The Forum will give the Ontario biotechnology industry a rational, transparent, and inclusive policy development process and provide the BCO with its annual "terms of reference" to bring to government. Throughout the day, there will be a series of breakout sessions, as well as featured speakers with specific expertise in public policy formation, development, and implementation.

Leading up to the Forum, the BCO has put in place an open policy development process to seek input on policy initiatives to nurture and strengthen four key drivers of the biotechnology industry-talent and human resources; the regulatory and legal environment; alliances/partnerships; and access to capital. These drivers were first identified in Getting OnTRAC-Benchmarking Ontario's Biotechnology Sector, a policy paper drafted for the BCO's November 2003 Roundtable.

"The BCO has been able to bring together the diverse groups representing the Ontario biotech community to collaborate on key policy issues," said Dale Patterson, executive vice president, Canadian Medical Discoveries Fund and chair of the BCO Founding Steering Committee.

Source: www.biotech.ca

New York state uses bioscience to fuel economy

State funding for the biosciences has grown dramatically in the past three years in New York, according to a new study by the Battelle Memorial Institute, the State Science and Technology Institute (SSTI) and Fleishman-Hillard International Communications for the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO).

According to the study, "Laboratories of Innovation: State Bioscience Initiatives 2004", New York ranks second in the US in three areas: total university R&D expenditures (\$2.76 billion), life sciences R&D expenditures (\$1.89 billion), and biological scientists in the workforce (more than 33,000). The study also reported that New York is third in the country in total National Institutes of Health support to institutions (\$1.71 billion) as well as higher education degrees in biological sciences (nearly 6,400).

"We're proud that New York is fast becoming a world leader in biotechnology research and that we've taken unprecedented steps to attract new jobs and biotech companies to New York," said New York Governor George E Pataki. "New York has a wealth of examples of how our successful biotechnology strategy has built upon the unique strengths and assets of our State economy all across New York. Our biotechnology companies are expanding and creating new, good paying high-tech jobs. As we move ahead with Phase II of New York's high-technology and biotechnology job creation efforts, New York is fostering the growth and expansion of new and existing biotechnology companies, which is playing an important role in our ambitious effort to create one million new jobs in New York by the end of the decade."

The BIO-Battelle study is the most comprehensive analysis ever done to quantify the scope and impact of bioscience employment in all 50 states. It also examines programs in each state to promote the development of bioscience companies. The study finds that employment and other economic activity in the biosciences has grown dramatically in the past three years, and states working to attract bioscience companies are learning that success means specializing in specific sub-sectors. "With 749 establishments in four industry subsectors employing more than 36,700 people, the bioscience industry in New York continues to be of growing importance to the state," said Karin Duncker, executive director, New York State Biotechnology Association (NYBA).

Source: www.nyba.org

Vatican listens to biotech food merits

The US Embassy to the Holy See, in cooperation with the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, hosted a seminar at the Gregorian University in Rome on September 23, 2004. The theme of the seminar was "Feeding a Hungry World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology". The conference brought together prominent scientists, leading experts in humanitarian relief and agricultural development in the developing world and farmers working with biotech foods to explore the potential of genetically modified organisms to address hunger and malnutrition. Its various sessions examined the current state of the global food crisis, the theological and moral case for biotech food, scientific advances in biotech crops, how developing world farmers have used biotech crops and debunking the myths of biotechnology. Among the speakers were Rev. Gonzalo Miranda, LC, Dean of the School of Bioethics, Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, Rome; Piero Morandini, Professor of genetic biotechnology, University of Milan; Prabhu Pingali, director of the Agricultural and Development Economics Division of FAO, UN, Rome; CS Prakash, professor, Tuskegee University, Alabama, USA; Carl Pray, professor, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA, director of the Department of Agricultural Food and Resource Economics, graduate program; Peter Raven, member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden and Engelmann, professor of botany at Washington University in St. Louis, USA. Expectedly the conference has been criticized by many anti GM organizations and has raised eyebrows amongst many in the catholic community.

South Africa launches new biotech policy

Africa

South Africa launches new biotech policy

On September 17, 2004 South African Science and Technology Minister Mosibudi Mangena announced the launch of a new South African biotechnology policy describing biotechnology development needs and opportunities in areas such as human health, plant improvement, animal health, and industrial processes. Mangena said that the launch of the policy "serves as a rallying call to industry to join us in developing a bio-economy" in South Africa. He said that the government recognizes the potential benefits of biotechnology, and, "Government is committed to creating the best possible climate, be it regulatory, political or commercial, for biotechnology investment."

The South African government has invested \$67.6 million in infrastructure to support biotechnology development, including setting up Biotechnology Regional Investment Centres (BRICs) to support and incubate research in the field. The three BRICs

are the Western Cape Biotech Institute, the Lifelab in Durban, and Biopad, which covers research initiatives in the central and northern areas of the country. Included in the total budget of \$45 million is \$10million that has been earmarked for funding the National Bio-Informatics Network, a Cray supercomputer based at the University of the Western Cape.

In a related report, Mangena also told a Johannesburg meeting on his department's strategic review and forecast on biotechnology platforms, that since implementing the country's National Biotechnology Strategy, the department has created five Trusts as agencies aimed with fasttracking the local biotech sector. "We need to recognize that, while the government is committed to developing biotech for South Africa, it can only be done through meaningful partnership with our biotech stakeholders, and with industry. We are determined to give the local sector every opportunity to mature responsibly as an African leader in biotechnology," the Secretary said.

Source: www.allafrica.com and www.africabio.com

Biotechnology gaining momentum in Africa

The acceptance of biotechnology is gaining momentum in Africa as more and more countries realize the potential it offers for sustainable food production as another tool to help eradicate famine and poverty, says Prof. Jocelyn Webster, executive director of AfricaBio.

Speaking in Pretoria at a Southern Africa Biotechnology Communications Training Workshop, she said it is hoped that by the end of 2005 most countries in Africa would have draft biosafety frameworks in place.

The workshop was organized by AfricaBio to train delegates regarding the need for biotech communication to inform the public in Southern African countries about biotechnology. More than 70 delegates from 10 of the 14 Southern African Development Community countries (SADC) attended. Representatives from Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania and the US also attended.

She pointed out that 30 African countries, including six SADC members, had already signed the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol (CBP). "AfricaBio will continue to assist African governments, tertiary institutions, the biotech industry and public research institutions involved in Living Modified Organisms (LMOs), to deal with the implications of the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol," Prof Dr Webster said. "We will help train more people to become available to public sector institutions for this purpose."

Several delegates indicated that they are requesting their governments to put the necessary legal frameworks in place. They also asked the South African authorities to assist with these procedures.

A consumer survey conducted under the auspices of the University of Pretoria in January 2004 indicated that 58 percent of consumers in Gauteng and 56 percent in Cape Town considered GM food to be as safe as conventional foods. The survey also found that respondents had confidence in government regulatory control measures.

Source: www.africabio.com

Biotech is catching up as cutting edge technology: Dr Paul Zambezi

"Information technology is a leading cutting edge technology, but biotechnology is catching up," says Dr Paul Zambezi, permanent secretary for the Zambian ministry of science, technology and vocational training. Biotechnology has applications in agriculture, health and industry, and can reduce use of pesticides while improving yields. Zambia adopted a policy on biotechnology and biosafety in 2003 and is now developing a strategy for implementation. Public awareness is one of the key components.

However, Zambezi cautions "Scientists must speak with one voice. We also do not want wild statements like we don't want biotechnology or we don't want genes in our tomatoes. Scientists need to understand that their concerns are different from consumer concerns."

Zambezi opened the biotechnology communication workshop organized by the Biotechnology Outreach Society of Zambia (BOSZ) that was attended by over 50 representatives from the media, government departments, members of parliament, and scientists. AfricaBio was represented by one of its board members, Dr Wynand van der Walt, who had a private discussion with Zambezi and offered to facilitate a meeting between the minister and his South Africa counterparts.

Modern biotechnology in Zambia is still in an embryonic stage, according to Zambezi. Apprehension exists about safety of GM food, environmental effects, adequate regulations and ethics of patenting. Countries need to assess benefits and risks of new technologies. Zambezi urged the media to work with scientists as stakeholders with the focus on national interests. Concerns must be addressed with factual information.

Member of parliament Emmerson Mudenda explained, "Zambia did not have biosafety systems in place when food aid was donated by the US in 2002. These consignments contained grain from GM crops and most information on safety was disseminated by anti-GM groups from Europe. Zambian scientists presented conflicting views to government. Government has a duty to ensure that food made available to consumers was safe."

"Zambia is in the process of creating an enabling environment for safe and responsible biotechnology application. Communication is needed for improved public understanding and a critical mass of Zambians will have to be developed to act as communicators," urged Dr Luke Mumba, chairperson of BOSZ.

Source: www.africabio.com

Biotech lab launched at Unam

A gene-modified organism testing, training and research lab was recently launched at the University of Namibia. This assumes significance, as till date there was no institution dealing with the application of modern biotechnology techniques there. The idea of setting up a biochemistry and biotechnology lab for research was spawned way back in 1998 but has finally taken shape now. The laboratory will have a crucial role to play in assisting government and interested institutions in reinforcing and implementing the

National Biosafety Framework by testing and monitoring the movement of grain, seeds and other items that might be genetically modified. The lab would carry out capacity building through training and research. The Convention of Biological Diversity (UNEP-GEF) has funded the lab equipment.