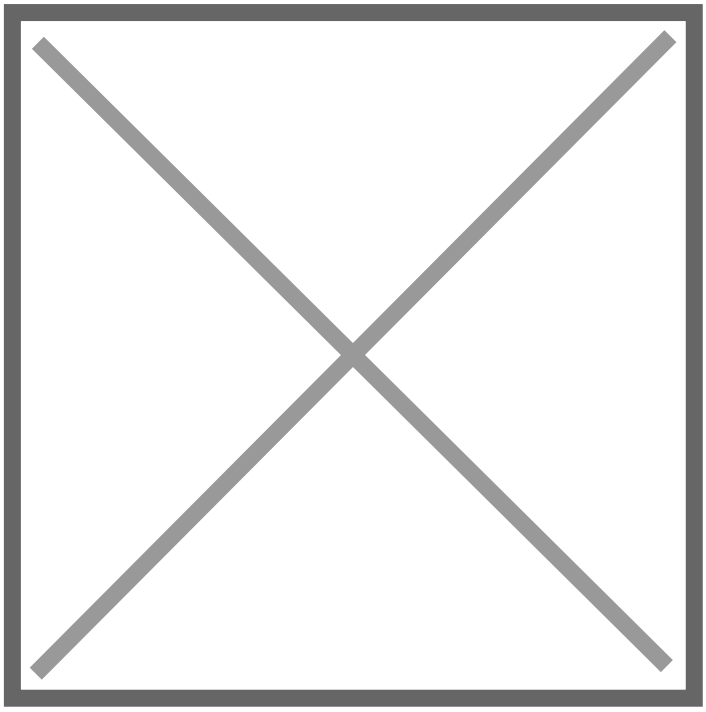
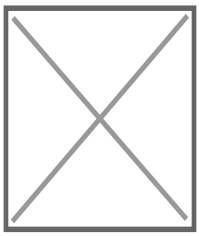
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Policy Matters

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p ALIGN="JUSTIFY">Things are moving fast on the biotechnology policy front. The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) has taken a series of steps in the last few weeks to expedite the formulation of a National Biotechnology Policy (NBP). The S&T minister Kapil Sibal and DBT secretary Dr MK Bhan are working in tandem to ensure that the new year dawns with a well-articulated NBP.

From the inaugural issue in March 2003, BioSpectrum has been championing the need for a NBP and has used every opportunity to stimulate a national debate on this issue. That these efforts are now bearing fruit is a matter of satisfaction to the magazine's team.

The Task Force to draft the NBP headed by Dr Bhan has an onerous task. No doubt, he has roped in a right mix of government policy makers, industry leaders, academics and a lone activist in Dr Suman Sahai. The three-month time frame provides the drafting committee the enormous opportunity to rewrite the biotech landscape of the country and reap the benefits of this cutting edge technology by India's teeming millions.

Often comparisons have been made between the information technology and biotechnology sectors in the recent past. These two are highly dissimilar technologies. Information technology, particularly the software sector, grew in spite of the government. All that it needed was the unshackling of a host of mindless government control processes and a new class of first-time entrepreneurs did the rest.

The industry leaders in the cradle of biotechnology, the US, agree that the government support was crucial in the enormous public funds spent on developing the capabilities in dozens of top class research centers, high quality research infrastructure made available to the industry in attractive packages and the overall thrust to help this sector. This is something the formulators of India's NBP should keep in mind.

The NBP should avoid the tendency to spell out priority areas for either public or private investments in biotechnology. Instead, it should clearly indicate the road map for the regulatory approaches such as whether genetically-engineered food products will be permitted or not, at least in the next five years, articulate the need for an integrated regulatory structure to handle all recombinant products and clarify the broad technology choices that would be permitted in the short term. This would help potential entrepreneurs to direct their efforts at products that would fly with regulators in the next five years. The policy should unambiguously spell out the timelines for the regulatory processes and also insist on roping in the best experts to be part of the regulatory system. The NBP should have an open mind on making revisions as the technology advances in leaps and bounds in the coming years.

Another major concern for the biotech entrepreneurs is the availability of venture capital. While the government is not the right agency to provide VC funds, due to its stranglehold on the financial system, indirect support to help early stage biotech developments should put the industry on a strong footing.

Given the range of expertise available to the task force and within the biotech community, there is hope that the NBP will be a document every one will be proud of. The decision to make available the draft report for public comments is another trendsetter in the move for a transparent framework for the growth of the biotechnology segment.

