

Fueling the future

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In the last few weeks, the nation's attention has been riveted on securing its future energy sources. Two major forms of energy were in the news. First, the landmark decision of the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group and deals with the US and France, which will pave the way for India to tap the nuclear energy in a big way in the coming decades. Second, the country's largest private company, Reliance Industries, joined the party by announcing a major crude oil find in the eastern coast which will eventually provide over 40 percent of the nation's current conventional petroleum product demand.

When these two major fuel sectors were making headlines, the biotech segment too decided to add its share to the nation's energy kitty. On September 11, the country got its first ever Biofuel Policy which seeks to convert at least a major part of the 60 million hectares of wastelands into farmlands for oil-bearing crops which can produce biodiesel in plenty. The government had started the biofuel initiative in 2003 and five years later, the nation finally got a policy framework.

There is no doubt that the Biofuel policy will give further boost to the existing efforts by the private and public sector institutions to ensure the nation's energy security. The Biofuel policy has set an ambitious target of 20 percent blended biodiesel by 2017. This means a production of 15-16 million tons of biodiesel and a coverage area of over 30 million acres of biofuel plantation. Though the policy has been announced only this September, companies have made significant investments in the biofuels arena after the announcement of biofuels mission in 2005. Some of the companies have just started the commercial production of biodiesel and several others are likely to start in the next two-three years. The investments which have gone into biofuels plantation and production are in excess of Rs 1,000 crore and the industry expects

the biofuels to rake in \$25 billion in revenues by 2017. This is not an unachievable target provided there is clear focus on the feedstock cultivation and a political will to implement the same.

While biofuels is one of the biotech ways to address the "save the planet Earth" initiatives, there are other ways of addressing it through biotechnology. For example, use of enzymes can play a major role in saving earth as they find applications in almost all industrial applications. According to a few reports, the use of enzymes in several industrial products is abysmally poor. There can be favorable guidelines to promote use of enzyme technology and probably an enzyme policy, on the lines of the Biofuel policy or the Biotech policy for recombinant drugs, needs to be formulated quickly. In the next few months BioSpectrum will take up the case for "green initiatives" and bring out white papers that can be relevant and important to India and from an Indian context too.

Another major focus area of the government should be health. The Union Budget had announced 15 percent increase in allocation for healthcare spending. It was a good decision however there has been little progress made by the health ministry for addressing serious issues. Take for example immunization. India has one of the lowest routine immunization rates in the world. Some estimates indicate that only 40-45 percent of children in the age group of 12-24 months are fully vaccinated (BCG, measles, and 3 doses of DPT and polio vaccines). National-level immunization programs are an important way for population protection. While Indian manufacturers are among the largest suppliers of quality vaccines to UNICEF, they are not recognized by our own national government and their concerns not addressed promptly by the policy makers. The industry is almost on the death bed. No new vaccine was launched by any Indian company in the last 12 months because of WHO's stand on strengthening the Indian regulator. Things seem to be improving but almost at a snail's pace. The government should rise and act fast to save our children and also our companies.

India certainly is the cynosure of the world's eye now in the genomics space. The Human Genome Organization (HUGO) held its annual Human Genome Meeting (HGM) in Hyderabad from Sep 27-30 2008. The field of genomics has seen some rapid progress in the last few years in India too. The Indian genes have been mapped and now we are moving towards open source drug discovery. About Rs 500 crore will be allocated for this. This is good for the industry and society. Wish you a happy festival season.

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