

United Front at BIO Boston

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It is heartening to note that the Indian biotech industry is going to present a united front at the forthcoming BIO event in Boston in early May. Industry leaders from different segments of biotech have welcomed the effort of DBT in organizing what may probably be the largest ever biotech business delegation to the world's largest biotechnology event.

Many of the suggestions from industry leaders highlighted by BioSpectrum after the last event have been incorporated into this year's planning for BIO. Other friends of the country, like the Indo-US Chamber of Commerce too have pitched in by organizing a high-profile event on May 7 at Boston to bring policy makers and CEOs from both the countries face-to-face to understand and promote biotechnology.

Over 40 companies and research organizations and trade promotion agencies will participate in the India Pavilion at BIO this time. There is still time to expand the participation by providing opportunities to some of the new entrepreneurs to use this platform to showcase their skills and catch the attention of global biotech leaders.

The global biotech industry had turned its focus to biofuels in the last 12-18 months, sensing the opportunity offered by the rising prices of petroleum-based products. In fact, this was the theme at BIO Chicago in 2006 and since then considerable progress has been made in tapping alternate sources of fuel using biotechnology to keep the global economy chug along the growth path without "oil shocks."

At the same time, biofuels such as ethanol, produced from agricultural products like corn have come under increasing opposition from environmentalists. There has been a decrease in global foodgrain stocks and prices have been soaring across the board. Environmentalists have been blaming the surging demand for alternate fuels based on agricultural products for the looming shortage of foodgrains around the world.

Countries like India have avoided getting into this trap and as a special report in this issue indicates, Indian companies are extracting biodiesel from made-to-order crops like jatropha and pongamia in vast stretches of wastelands.

India has mandated a five percent blend of biodiesel with the conventional diesel and the industry will need some fiscal and other incentives to achieve this goal by 2010. Shortage of raw materials is a major concern. Though more fuel-bearing crops can be grown, the absence of sufficient processing plants in these areas seems to be hampering the growth of this sector. This should give some food for thought to the policy makers.

Meanwhile, the country's biotech teaching institution (ranked by the BioSpectrum Top 20 BT Schools Survey), the Rajiv Gandhi Center for Biotechnology in Thiruvananthapuram , is in the throes of an administrative crisis. The transfer of this Kerala-government promoted center to the Central government to be bestowed the status of a National Institution to avail the Rs 50-crore special grants announced in February 2006, has been stalled due to a political row within the Kerala government. There are also allegations that a section of the state bureaucracy has undermined the efforts of the state chief minister's decision to transfer the institution to the Central government's control. It will be in the industry's and nation's interest to resolve this issue at the earliest so that this excellent institution can continue with its futuristic mandate, undeterred by administrative issues.

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