



Environmental Institutions Seminar Series

Presents

Maurice Lex, Ph.D.

Directorate General for Research of the European Commission,
Belgium

Biotechnology in European Society: Perceptions, Consequences, and Solutions

Thursday, April 8, 2004

12:30 – 2:00 pm

158A LSRC, Research Drive

Abstract

This talk will focus on European biotechnology issues and their national and global repercussions.

Perceptions matter. Politicians are sensitive to perceptions, and politicians make laws. European Union (EU) legislation is transposed into national laws and EU policies influence our international commitments. With Europe as the world's largest trading bloc, when EU regulations ban or consumers refuse the products of a new technology there are global impacts on the development and diffusion of the technology.

There is much talk of the "precautionary principle". We have carefully defined its use and misapplied it in biotechnology regulation. A wide gap has developed between expert opinion on biosafety, and EU legislation, a gap based on perceptions, pretences and propaganda – not precautions. The consequences are dangerous. Such legislation may create more problems than it solves: does it restore public trust; is it vulnerable to challenge at international level; what are the consequences of it slowing down the diffusion of what might be beneficial technologies?

Biotechnology in Europe confronts an unspoken but powerful political alliance of Draconian legislation, Environment Ministers with their own agendas, environmental NGOs, the media, organic farmers, the crop protection industry, and – reportedly – "public opinion". In this climate of hostility to science, mistrust of government, and pervasive paranoia about pseudo-risks, innovative technologies face a risk of assassination by stigmatisation. This is not in the public interest.

Scientists must be prepared to speak out, to confront the propaganda and the opposing vested interests. Politicians must lead with integrity and foresight.

The scientific community has a major role to play in rebuilding trust and in countering the dishonesty and propaganda which currently delay and block the effective development and diffusion of products and services based upon the wealth of new knowledge

which the life sciences have so successfully delivered over recent decades.

Biography

Dr Maurice Lex has 23 years experience in biotechnology research and public policy development in Europe. He joined the European Commission in Brussels in 1990 in the Directorate General for Research. From 1990 to 1996 he edited and published the bi-monthly newsletter, *European Biotechnology Information Service (EBIS)* which reported on public policy developments worldwide. He was most recently a member of the drafting team for the Commission's *Communication on Life Sciences and Biotechnology: a Strategy for Europe (COM (2002) 27)*. He is a member of the OECD's Working Party on Biotechnology and executive secretary of the EC/US Task Force for biotechnology research. He has followed the development of biotechnology regulations and public perceptions in Europe as project officer for the Eurobarometer surveys on biotechnology. He has held several Round Table meetings on GMO safety research and has published on the precautionary principle as applied to biotechnology.

Prior to joining the European Commission he was Assistant Director of the UK's Science and Engineering Research Council's Biotechnology Directorate following a career as a research microbiologist.

**Co-sponsored with the Center for Genome
Ethics, Law, and Policy**

