

Biotech Restrictions at Home and Abroad

By ACSH Staff — July 28, 2003

Biotech boosters have sometimes used the practical argument that if the U.S. imposes heavy regulations on biotech the cloning of human cells or the genetic modification (g.m.) of plants companies and scientists might flee to other nations. That may yet prove true, but it looks like those companies and scientists will have to flee to somewhere less glamorous than Europe.

There have been reminders over the past two months that Europe does not have a laissez-faire attitude toward biotech, whether of the human or plant variety.

The newly-unveiled draft version of the European Union constitution, for instance, explicitly prohibits cloning, not only of whole, living babies but also, it would appear, of cells and tissues if done for profit (apparently, a revolution in biology is all right as long as no one gains financially). Article II-3 (part 2, items b-d) of the draft constitution decrees:

- (b) the prohibition of eugenic practices, in particular those aiming at the selection of persons,
- (c) the prohibition on making the human body and its parts as such a source of financial gain,
- (d) the prohibition of the reproductive cloning of human beings.

This is much more restrictive than the U.S. federal government's withholding of funding from stem cell research (though sweeping bans of both public and private cloning research have been proposed in Congress without success).

In fact, America took a small but important step closer to ensuring the freedom to clone at the same time that the EU was drafting its new constitution. The American Medical Association announced that it views cloning research as medically ethical and thinks it should be allowed to continue but that doctors who object to the research should not be pressured to participate.

America has been more hospitable than Europe to *plant* biotech for several years now, and it appears likely that the U.S. will continue to fight with the EU over access to European markets for American g.m. crops. Though some saw the EU Parliament's July 2 passage of laws allowing the sale of g.m. crops as an important step toward lifting the de facto ban on g.m. in Europe, conditions of sales in Europe would include strict separation of g.m. and non-g.m. food, labeling, and careful tracking of all g.m. crops "from farm to fork," as Reuters' [Robin Pomeroy](#) ^[1] reports. All this unfairly singles out g.m. as potentially dangerous, without scientific justification, and is seen as a substantial enduring trade barrier by the U.S. As Pomeroy rightly notes, the EU's five years of a de facto ban on g.m. followed the mad cow disease scandal and other food scares.

One has to have some sympathy for EU politicians, who are not generally Luddites but must appease a wary public and anti-biotech protesters even more ardent than the ones in the U.S. Anti-biotech protesters made a ruckus at a California convention of several nations' agriculture

secretaries last month, but the overlapping anti-biotech and anti-globalization movements tend to draw larger and more violent crowds in Europe. (Witness the recent rock-throwing assault on the French Socialist Party's headquarters by anti-globe protesters who think that even that party has become too right-wing.) Strict labeling of g.m. no doubt sounds like a moderate compromise to many politicians hemmed in between green protests and U.S. threats of trade retaliation. Their seemingly-moderate solution nonetheless stifles trade, science, and efforts to keep food production costs and prices low.

For now, biotech proponents will have to take solace in the thought that opposition to plant biotech unlike the opposition to human biotech has the air of faddishness about it and hasn't been enshrined in the new constitution the way anti-cloning sentiment has. Gradual acceptance of plant biotech seems inevitable, as the years go by and it becomes clear that neither Americans nor Europeans are getting sick from the stuff and that the new technology offers the hope of increasing crop yields. Cloning, like abortion, appears more likely to become a matter of pure principle for people on both sides of the issue and therefore the sort of thing one writes into constitutions or sweeping proclamations and as such cloning may be fought over for decades to come, whether we like it or not.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2003/07/28/biotech-restrictions-at-home-and-abroad>

Links

[1] <http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=21376&newsdate=03-Jul-2003>