

In 1993, federal and provincial environment ministers agreed to a co-operative approach on a number of areas related to environmental protection. More recently, in the area of biotechnology, governments have been working together to bring consistency, without duplication, to regulations on the release of biotechnology products into the environment.

The Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) covers biotechnology products. It serves as a reference point and model for other legislation. CEPA requires a risk-based assessment to be prepared prior to any permission being granted to manufacture or import a biological substance.

Several provinces have initiated activity on environmental protection related to biotechnology. For example, the British Columbia Environmental Protection Act will address biotechnology substances. It will provide a framework to prevent or minimize any damage to the environment, as well as any loss of biodiversity that may arise from the escape or release of genetically modified organisms.

As part of the federal Green Plan, there is a national regulatory action plan for the control of toxic substances. In 1995, there will be standards established for the deliberate release of genetically engineered micro-organisms, and controls put in place to prevent accidental release.

In 1993, the federal government published the principles of a federal framework for regulating the products of biotechnology, to be implemented in early 1995. It was developed through consultation with all orders of government, industry, academia, Aboriginal people, and public interest groups.

Since that time, work has been under way in various federal departments to expand their regulatory mandates to address the environmental impact assessment and safe human consumption requirements of new biotechnology products. A committee of federal representatives will oversee development and implementation of an action plan. This will identify specific responsibilities and timeframes for delivery of the federal framework for biotechnology regulations, expected to be in place by September 1995.

The federal government is also committed to improve public understanding of biotechnology. An opinion survey indicated that Canadians are aware of this technology but show some concern about its use. A proposed project would follow up on these findings by providing a balanced perspective on the risks and benefits of biotechnology.

Initiatives to provide public access to information held by the government have also been launched. For example, in 1995, the federal government will make available through a public access computer system the complete regulations on biotechnology for CEPA, the supporting documentation, and the non-confidential business information on biotechnology products permitted for release into the environment.