

Enhancing Safety and Developing an International Basis for Co-operation

Canada contributes to international efforts to strengthen environmental protection related to biotechnology through co-operation with other countries and international agencies such as the OECD and the UNEP. For example, Canada is working, through the OECD, to develop a set of principles for microbial fertilizers. This could be a template for all microbial applications. Canada also takes part in other OECD activities related to biotechnology through working groups of the Science, Technology and Industry Committee and the Environmental Policy Committee.

Canada works with the United States and the European Union on issues concerning environmental protection related to biotechnology. Environment Canada will be sponsoring annual meetings on ecological risk assessment of biotechnology, along with the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Department of Agriculture. These forums will draw research scientists from both governments and from industry and academia. They will give an opportunity to discuss ongoing and proposed activities in the area of gene transfer, fate and effects testing, gene survival, dispersal, and contingency planning.

CIDA assistance to developing countries related to biotechnology development will now contain advice on environmental protection. This advice will assist in building capacity in developing countries.

Information on environmental risk assessments performed in Canada on all releases of biotechnology products will soon be available through the OECD and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation via the BIOTRACK system.

Challenges and Next Steps

Biotechnology is positioned to make a substantial contribution to the Canadian economy. The sustained focus on development of this potential, in step with development of appropriate regulatory and environmental oversight, will enable Canadians and their trading partners to reap important benefits as anticipated in Chapter 16 of Agenda 21.

Still, as with any technology in its infancy, the full environmental impact of biotechnology is largely unknown. Historically, some products developed through other technologies, and with the best of intentions have had negative effects on the environment. That reality colours the perceptions and understanding of many Canadians on this issue. Therefore, public trust in the relevance and competence of the regulatory system must be strengthened. Yet this is an issue with ethical, scientific, and public policy aspects not easily amenable to reconciliation through law or regulations.