

Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

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Hold For Release
May 25, 1989

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WHO OWNS BIOTECHNOLOGY?

Canberra -- Who owns biotechnology breakthroughs? How can poor countries profit from high-tech developments, particularly in food production? Where can genetically engineered plants or animals be released?

These and other issues will be explored at an international seminar to be held May 25-27, at the Becor Building, Gordon Street, Canberra Civic. The seminar, "Agricultural Biotechnology Opportunities for International Development," is being held in conjunction with a meeting of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), which supports a variety of major food crop research programs in developing countries.

"Biotechnology is extremely relevant to Australia's international aid efforts," according to Gabrielle Persley, Research Program Coordinator of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). "We have a good deal of biotech expertise in this country, and are interested in its commercial development."

Advanced biotechnology--involving techniques such as tissue culture, gene transfer, and protoplast fusion--may hold the key to some of the more difficult agricultural problems in developing nations that are currently undergoing food shortfalls.

Biotechnology may, for example, be used to increase a plant's ability to biologically "fix" nitrogen from the air as a natural fertilizer, or to modify the character of some vegetable oils to make them more marketable in developed countries.

However, such research is expensive. Concern that developing countries may become totally dependent on industrialized nations for the benefits of advanced techniques has prompted an extensive study by the Australian government and two international organizations--the World Bank and the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR), in The Netherlands, who are sponsoring the Canberra seminar. Persley is on assignment in the Netherlands from ACIAR to coordinate the study, which will be released in final form in late 1989.

Delegates are expected from ASEAN member countries and several African and Latin American nations, as well as representatives of the international research centers and donor organizations attending the CGIAR meeting.

"The protection of intellectual property rights is probably the most controversial issue before the seminar," Persley says. "Many developing countries have no provision for patents or copyrights. As private sector investment in biotechnology increases, ways must be found to negotiate for their results for use in these countries."

According to Persley, controversy will also center on the release of genetically engineered materials, and how less developed countries can ensure the safety of these practices within their borders.

"We expect to see recommendations coming out of the seminar for national biosafety review bodies," Persley says. "The thirteen international agricultural research centers supported by the CGIAR may be asked to provide developing country governments with annually updated information on the experiences and current policies of countries that have biotechnology safety review mechanisms."

Seminar participants will also review the structure of the biotechnology industry in industrialized countries, and opportunities for public and private sector collaboration. The results of studies on the likelihood of modern biotechnology contributing to the production of vegetable oil crops, wheat, bananas, cocoa and coffee will also be presented.