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The Future of Agricultural Research

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We enthusiastically support Philip H. Abelson's call for substantially increased funding for basic agricultural research (Editorial, 28 Aug., p. 1187). However, he neglects the government's critical role as gatekeeper; some federal regulatory policies are serious impediments to progress in the agricultural sciences. A subsequent editorial by Charles Arntzen, "Regulation of transgenic plants" (4 Sept., p. 1327), points out that research on genetically engineered plants is now subject to delays and extensive assessments that result from perceptions of public concern and not from scientific evidence of risk. When government's research and regulatory policies conflict, the public loses twice—their investment in the U.S. research enterprise is thwarted, and they pick up the tab for unnecessary regulatory reviews (*1*).

Twenty years after publicly funded research gave us the tools for recombinant DNA research, the time has come for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency to write regulations about products rather than the research methods used to create them (*2*). Governmental oversight is essential to protect human and environmental health, but agencies should follow the lead of the Food and Drug Administration in crafting reasonable, unambiguous policies (*3*) that focus on identifiable product risks and not on the researcher's bench. A recent USDA proposal (*4*) is a positive step.

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