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COMMERCE SUSPENDS ACCELERATED  
PROCESSING OF PATENTS ON DNA  
RESEARCH INVENTIONS

In a joint announcement with the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, the Secretary of Commerce said today that the Commerce Department will temporarily suspend accelerated processing of patent applications for recombinant DNA research inventions.

Secretary of Commerce Juanita M. Kreps added, however, that Commerce's Patent and Trademark Office will, when requested, continue accelerated processing of patent applications for laboratory equipment that contribute to safety in this field.

HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., said the temporary suspension was put into effect while the Federal Interagency Committee for Recombinant DNA Research considers recommendations concerning research conducted by the private sector in this field. Secretaries Kreps and Califano said the Committee will consider the patent question at a meeting Friday, February 25.

The Patent Office had published a notice on January 13 concerning accelerated processing of inventions in this research field. Recombinant DNA research involves the joining in the test tube of pieces of DNA--the material which determines the hereditary characteristics of all living cells--from the same organism or different organisms. The newly joined molecules are then inserted into living organisms, such as bacteria. The recombinant DNA may affect the form and function of the offspring produced from such combinations.

Secretaries Kreps and Califano said, "The potential benefits from this research include major advances in understanding the mechanism of heredity and the development of new compounds to treat many diseases. Potential dangers include the possibility that hazardous agents might be produced in the course of such research."

The National Institutes of Health published guidelines for the safe conduct of this research in Federal laboratories on June 12 of last year.

Secretary Kreps pointed out that the Commerce Department's offer to accelerate the processing of patent applications in this area was to induce researchers throughout the world who might have an interest in U.S. patent rights to adopt the NIH guidelines in their laboratory procedures.

"It also was intended," she added, "to hasten the disclosure and application of inventions which could contribute to the safety of this research."

Secretary Califano said that the Interagency Committee of Recombinant DNA Research, headed by NIH Director Donald S. Fredrickson, would soon make recommendations on several issues related to this complex and important subject, including its patent aspects.

He added that one of the Committee's responsibilities is to recommend, if appropriate, legislation or regulation to govern the conduct of this research in all public and private laboratories in the United States.

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