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THE GREEN SHEET

News About the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

Chronicle of Higher Ed, 8/1

Scientists Fight Senate DNA Bill

Opponents say measure would create unnecessary bureaucracy, give too much control to non-biologists

By Cheryl M. Fields

WASHINGTON
Congress's August recess cannot come too soon for scientific groups and university lobbyists who want the Senate to postpone consideration of its bill to regulate "recombinant DNA" research.

The Senate bill, S 1217, which would authorize the setting of safety and licensing standards for all facilities conducting the controversial experiments combining genes from different organisms, is strongly opposed by several leading scientific groups.

Among other things, they say the bill reported by the Senate Committee on Human Resources, would:

- Create unnecessary, additional federal bureaucracy by setting up an independent commission to set safety standards.
- Ignore research indicating the possible dangers of the research—including the creation of dangerous new hybrid organisms—have probably been overstated.
- Provide overly severe penalties for violations of regulations governing the research by imposing fines,

rather than just revoking a facility's license to conduct the research.

- Give too much control of the research to non-biologists by giving a majority of the seats on the national commission to non-biologists.

Some scientists also have expressed fears that the technical definition of recombinant research in the bill could lead to expanded regulation of other genetic research. Spokesmen for the committee, however, say there is no intent to regulate anything except recombinant experiments.

Drafted primarily by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, and the staff of his Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, the bill last week was considered unlikely to come up for a vote in the Senate before that body recesses on Aug. 8. It is scheduled to reconvene on Sept. 7.

Such predictions are always subject to change, however, as lawmakers try to clear up pending legislation before a long recess.

As one university lobbyist puts it, however: "We hope they won't take the bill up so it can fester awhile.

More people are finding out what the bill contains now."

Harlyn O. Halvorson, a Brandeis University biologist who has been leading scientific organizations' opposition to provisions of the Kennedy bill, agrees a postponement would be welcome.

"One of the problems is that many scientific societies do not have national offices, so communication with members is slow. When the bill is explained, though, the reaction is outrage," says Mr. Halvorson, the immediate past president of the American Society for Microbiology.

'Amazing Coalition'

Mr. Halvorson and a group of scientists from a number of other groups met with Mr. Kennedy recently to press their concerns.

The final report outlining the need for the bill and explaining its provisions, S REP 95-359, was filed July 22. Mr. Halvorson says that, from the scientists' viewpoint, their mission had not been very successful.

In "an amazing coalition," he says, the leaders, and in some cases

the full membership, of more than two dozen scientific groups with some 500,000 members have agreed on a set of principles that should underlie the DNA legislation. The groups include the American Society for Microbiology, the Genetic Society of America, the Association of American Medical Colleges, the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, and the National Society for Medical Research.

A bill approved by the House Subcommittee on Health and Environment, while presenting a few problems, conforms to most of the principles, Mr. Halvorson says, since it would:

- Lodge authority for regulating the safety of recombinant DNA studies in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and give the H.E.W. Secretary the flexibility to modify the standards as needed.
- Place substantial authority for regulating the safety of the research in local biohazard committees.
- Give researchers a substantial representation on those committees.

The Senate bill and report, however,

according to Mr. Halvorson and other university representatives, would create an expensive, unneeded federal bureaucracy. It would create an 11-member national commission to assume authority for setting safety standards and licensing research facilities, instead of vesting the authority in H.E.W.

The Senate report estimates that the commission, its staff, and 50 federal inspectors of DNA facilities would cost \$3.68-million in the first year of its operation. The report contends that H.E.W. "is not the appropriate agency to regulate the research," since its National Institutes of Health finance much of it.

Scientists are disturbed, Mr. Halvorson says, that the Senate report—although better than a draft version—still places too much emphasis on the hazards of the research.

Too Much Lay Authority

Mr. Halvorson notes that scientists have had four years of experience with recombinant studies since the first concerns were raised about the technique in 1973. He says the research thus far has shown that insertion of recombinant DNA molecules into host bacteria either has not altered the disease-causing properties of the bacteria or has lessened them.

The composition of the "local biohazards" committees that would review and approve research proposals would "delegate too much authority to lay people" under the Senate bill, Mr. Halvorson says.

One-third of the members would be non-biologists with no connection to the institution—although they could be scientists—and one third would be researchers or other employees of the recombinant facilities. The institution could select anyone it chose for the final one-third.

Six members of the 11-member national commission would be non-biologists, under the Senate bill, although they could have backgrounds in medicine, the physical sciences, or many other fields.

Many researchers interested in conducting recombinant DNA studies urged Congress this spring to enact legislation that would set uniform national guidelines for institutions and industry, after concern about the possible dangers involved in the research had led a number of university communities, including Cambridge, Mass., to begin enacting differing local guidelines.

The recombinant technique, which involves splicing together strands of genes—consisting of deoxyribonucleic acid or DNA—from different organisms, is expected to shed light on hereditary processes. Defenders say such information could, among other benefits, lead to improved treatment of disease and to development of better agricultural products.

Critics say the research also might produce new diseases or strains of bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

Those concerns, also voiced originally by supporters of the research, led the National Institutes of Health to issue guidelines last summer for the conduct of recombinant experiments in universities.

Wash Post; 8/4

170 Found Getting Dual Welfare Pay

Study Reveals Duplications in D.C., Md., Va.

By Alice Bonner
United Press International

A federal study has found 147 persons who collect welfare checks in both the District of Columbia and one of several jurisdictions in Maryland or Virginia, it was reported yesterday.

Another 23 persons receive duplicate benefits from both Maryland and Virginia, the investigation by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare said.

Since residency is required in the local jurisdiction providing aid to families with dependent children, the major federally funded welfare program, duplicate enrollment is a clear violation of federal statutes, an HEW spokesman said.

"I can't conceive of any situation where this is permissible," said spokesman Robert Wilson of the recently created HEW inspector general's office.

HEW discovered the interjurisdictional payments from records it collected to launch a new program aimed at uncovering federal workers who are fraudulently on local welfare rolls, Wilson said.

Initial application of that program, called Project Match, in the District, identified 216 HEW employees as receiving welfare benefits here, including 105 by apparent fraud or error, HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. said last week.

According to Wilson, further screening of those cases has raised the number involving suspected fraud or error to 142.

Comparing local welfare rosters "was a relatively easy thing to do since we had the records here to compare to HEW records," Wilson said.

In Maryland, AFDC rosters from Baltimore city and Montgomery, Prince George's and Baltimore counties were matched with those of Virginia and the District. The Virginia jurisdictions included were Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax County and Fairfax City.

The comparisons also showed six persons on more than one of the Virginia jurisdictions' welfare rolls, Wilson said. The problem was uncovered simply by matching names, he said.

Wilson said HEW has reported its findings to the local governments, who are responsible for the integrity of their welfare rolls.

D.C. Department of Human Resources director Albert P. Russo said his agency received information Tuesday on the 147 cases involved here, and is "reviewing every one." Sixteen of them involve duplicated support from Virginia and 131 from Maryland.

Russo said DHEW has similarly checked its welfare rolls against Prince George's County's for the last four years, and considers it "a worthwhile endeavor."

In a meeting between city and federal officials Tuesday, Russo said DHEW also has given lists of HEW

workers who receive welfare benefits here and is studying them for possible fraud.

Both the Justice Department and HEW's inspector general also are investigating the 142 employees. Wilson said. He said penalties could range from simply cutting off their benefits to administrative action against their jobs, or to criminal prosecution.

At least 53 of the workers who warranted further study earn more than \$3,000 a year, and seven of those are paid above \$10,000, according to Wilson.

Employed persons with large families and low salaries often qualify for AFDC support, Wilson said. 51 of the HEW workers were found to be "clean" by these standards. The remaining 23 receive AFDC checks for foster children in their homes, he said.

In its intensified effort to reduce District welfare error rates—among the nation's highest at nearly 24 per cent—DHR yesterday announced resumption of home visits to verify the eligibility of AFDC applicants.

Russo said the visits, begun on a trial basis by two investigators at a Southeast eligibility center, will occur only with the applicants' consent. Refusal of the visitation will not cause denial of benefits, as it did prior to 1969, he said.

Welfare investigators routinely paid unannounced visits at odd hours to the homes of applicants and recipients until 1969. The practice, decried by welfare rights groups and prohibited by court rulings, ceased that year. HEW stopped accepting a simple declaration of need in determining welfare eligibility and required verification.

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White House will study relevance of federally backed research projects

A broad review of federal research and development expenditures will soon get started under the direction of Presidential Science and Technology Advisor Frank Press. His position and his staff in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy got a new lease on life on July 15, when President Carter decided to retain an in-house science advisor. Press and his staff of 22 will provide support and direction for a panel of outsiders to review the "basic research of mission agencies" to make sure that the research is relevant. The Defense Dept.'s multibillion-dollar basic research program will be the first to be scrutinized. Other outside panels will review policy issues of interest to the chemical process industries, such as offshore drilling technology, disposal of radioactive wastes, threats to the ozone layer and patent policy. "The President is concerned about patent policy. He wants to know about the issues, particularly about the problems that stem from federally funded research and development," Press declares.

FDA to require warning brochures for estrogen containing prescriptions

Despite reservations voiced by the pharmaceutical industry, the Food and Drug Administration is ordering brochures to be included with prescriptions for products containing estrogen. These would include birth-control pills used by an estimated 1 million women. The Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Assn. says the FDA order may confuse patients and raise unnecessary fears. But FDA says that all estrogen prescriptions filled after Sept. 21 must include the brochure, which would include warnings about possible side effects. Manufacturers would be required to include a warning against use of estrogen by patients suffering simple nervousness and depression during menopause, since the drug has not been shown to be effective for these purposes, FDA says.

'Greenhouse effect' from burning fossil fuels poses threat to earth

The massive shift to burning fossil fuels to generate electricity could endanger the earth's atmosphere by creating a "greenhouse effect," according to a report issued last week by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. NRC-NAS predicts that carbon dioxide emissions from burning significantly greater amounts of coal could increase the temperature of the atmosphere by 6 C, enough to radically change the boundaries of crop-growing around the world and perhaps melting part of the polar ice caps. NRC-NAS has recommended a worldwide research program to identify any mitigating effects in the carbon cycle. NRC-NAS predicts that alternative energy might have to be brought onstream within 50 years to prevent "severe consequences."

Changes in federal oil and gas leasing policy are taking shape

Profound changes in the federal government's offshore oil and gas leasing system have been approved by the Senate. The Interior Dept. would be required to experiment with a variety of bidding systems and would conduct its own preliminary exploration of tracts to better determine potential production levels. Also, Interior would have the authority to investigate the production of existing domestic wells on its own instead of having to rely on information supplied by oil companies. Drilling companies would be responsible for up to \$35 million in damages if a spill occurs. The House is expected to go along with several significant changes in present leasing policy.