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Open communication on genetic engineering

REACTION

In his letter to the editor, Robin Rose (March) implied that academic research with genetically engineered trees is being conducted under a cloud of secrecy, and that its practitioners fail to communicate about their work. I would like to challenge both assertions. First, Oregon State University guidelines, which are typical among US universities today, require publication and allow for only short delays (e.g., 60 days) to consider patent rights to help get a new technology developed. Apart from this brief interval, which rarely affects student or faculty publications, the work is rapidly made available to the public. In addition, many biotechnology researchers, including us (www.fsl.orst.edu/tgerc/), post their unpublished results and research activities on websites.

Many biotechnology researchers have also gone out of their way to communicate with critics and the public in general. For example, this past summer we convened an international symposium to discuss the ecological and social issues surrounding the use of genetically engineered trees. Fourteen of the 28 invited speakers were environmentalists, ecologists, and ethicists who had no vested interests in biotechnology. The meeting was attended by representatives from 23 countries, and it was reported on at length by the popular press. The proceedings are now available online (www.fsl.orst.edu/tgerc/iufro2001/eprocd_02.pdf), and a book based on talks given at the meeting will be published soon.

Oregon State University is engaged in other efforts to foster public dialog with regard to genetically engineered trees. Terri Lomax is the director of the Program for the Analysis of Biotechnology Issues. In this capacity she performs public outreach regarding biotechnology. She regularly conducts workshops and speaks to reporters, civic groups, legislators, school children, regulators, and others. For the past two years, she and Steve Strauss have offered a course that addresses biotechnology issues. They invite a wide array of experts, on both sides of the issue, to speak to the students each week. They also allow members of the public at large to enroll in the course at no cost. The most recent lecture schedule (available online at www.oregonstate.edu/instruct/bi399/lectureschedule.htm) shows the diversity of views they invite.

Finally, a number of workers have tried hard to reason with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) about its stand on genetic engineering (e.g., Strauss et al. 2001, *International Forestry Review* 3(2):87Ð104). In its rebuttal to the Strauss et al. article in the December 2001 *Journal of Forestry,* FSC emphasized the risks to its marketing strategy over the conduct of science to evaluate safety and benefits. Biotechnology involves a wide range of approaches, products, benefits, and risks; treating it as a single entity cannot be defended either biologically or socially. Ultimately, ethical decisions about new technologies require that benefits be weighed against risks. With its ban, FSC chooses to obstruct, rather than advance, an informed, ethical evaluation of the various forest biotechnologies. I support forest certification; however, I also fear that absolute, single-minded stances on complex issues, particularly where the pursuit of knowledge itself is banned, will ultimately undermine public education and trust.

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