

Knowledge Cluster on Biotechnologies
Thursday October 26 2006, 5.30 – 7.00 at the CIELAP Office

Facilitator, Anne Mitchell, Executive Director

Anne welcomed everyone to CIELAP's xx Knowledge Cluster and asked the seven people present to introduce themselves and indicate their interest in biotechnologies. Anne then gave the following brief presentation of CIELAP's work and interest in the area:

- CIELAP's interest – 1984 workshop re food biotechnology – issues related to food production; subsistence farming; right to food; food sovereignty issues. In 1984 we identified the need for a policy framework around these technologies as they evolve.
- Previous research etc we have raised questions and concerns about these technologies – particularly that cross species – identified gaps in the policy framework in Canada.
- Most recent work – series of fact sheets on five different technologies.
- Previous involvement – consultations etc – and want to work with the federal government to figure out a way forward.
- This is our 2nd KC on biotech. The 1st one in February 2006. Conclusion – we need a process where there is an open debate on the pros and cons of these technologies – and the government needs to develop a process to allow that.
- We know we are not going to stop biotechnology and nanotechnology. These technologies are here. But how can we move forward with caution.
- We want to engage in a conversation around what do citizens expect of their government when addressing complex issues such as biotechnology and nanotechnology.

What do we want?

- A policy framework that includes regulations, liability regime, precautionary approach, transparency, accessible information and mechanisms for ongoing public participation. (CIELAP's Principles paper – based on the principles from the Royal Society Expert Panel).
- Leadership from the federal government to address legitimate concerns
- Consumer choice – labeling

- Public involvement – especially in decisions re tax dollar investment in these technologies.
- Public education – unbiased information on potential impacts on the environment; potential downside of any of these technologies.
- Coordination among civil society groups – or among citizens who have a concern about these technologies.
- Need to identify the research gaps and priorities?
- A research team to work with
- Funding

We want to host a workshop with government, industry, academics, civil society and have a serious conversation on how we as a country are going to move forward as these technologies evolve.

Canada has said it wants to be a responsible player. How do we do this?

What are your expectations of government re these technologies?

Anne also referred to two recent CBAC documents and invited those present to help CIELAP make a considered response to these documents.

The comments below emerged in the discussion which followed Anne's presentation:

- This is a timely topic – we haven't learned from past failures and practices
- What are the costs and what are the benefits of these technologies?
- Canadian policy is following US policy – since 1986 - no separate legislated statutes – but the technology has gone far beyond what was around in 1986
- Subject is very nebulous – the discussion on food galvanized a lot of interest
- We need a focus – for CIELAP this would be food and trees
- GE canola has become a weed – a corporation has created a weed – a deliberative action – there needs to be a strong liability regime
- What about a Senate Royal Commission?
- Not wanting to be cynical – but we need to speak to people where they will notice – potential effect on children? Vulnerable populations? What about a scientific analysis of milk? Kids drink milk.
- Appropriate role of government is to defend/represent the public interest – this kind of scientific research should be done by governments.
- Government needs to set up watchdog mechanisms.
- If government won't – or can't – civil society needs to set up such mechanisms – and government needs to finance it.

- There is no oversight of the regulatory process.
- The private sector does what the private sector does – makes profits
- Response – needs to include strong liability laws
- Industry needs to internalize liability costs of doing business
- There needs to be a dispassionate ‘manager’?
- Proponents doing and financing the research – needs to be peer reviewed and transparent
- An opportunity for CIELAP – empowerment for citizens groups – help increase public’s ability to deal with controversial issues; to evaluate issues; what are the right questions to be asking? What is the problem these technologies are trying to fix? How to evaluate complex issues?
- Focus groups and surveys could be helpful
- We need to cut through the crap and identify – What is the Real Problem we are trying to address?