



# Safety in Biotechnology News

Inter-Agency Network for Safety in Biotechnology (IANB)

No. 1, 23 May 2000

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## Introduction

This is the first issue of *Safety in Biotechnology News*, a newsletter that will be published approximately every six months. This is an important step to improve information sharing and co-operation amongst those Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) with activities related to safety in biotechnology. Currently there is an emphasis on food production and food safety.

*Biosafety News* is mainly intended for: 1) the Secretariats of these IGOs to keep one another informed of their activities; 2) delegates from Member States who participate in the work, and 3) other interested parties. We hope that it will be an important source of information for all those interested in biosafety. This first issue is a brief introduction to the work of each IGO.

Meetings related to biosafety, which will take place during 2000, are referred to under "Future events".

## PARTICIPATING INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

### Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

Contact: Joel Cohen  
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### Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

Contact: Cyrie Sendashonga  
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### Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

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### International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB)

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### Office International des Epizooties (OIE)

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### Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

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### United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

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### United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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### United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

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### World Trade Organization (WTO)

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## INTER-AGENCY NETWORK FOR SAFETY IN BIOTECHNOLOGY (IANB)

A number of Intergovernmental Organisations have projects related to safety in biotechnology.

Nine of these Organisations (CGIAR, CBD, FAO, OECD, OIE, UNCTAD, UNIDO, WHO and WTO) met in Paris, 25-26 November 1999.

As a result of their discussions, they agreed that it would be valuable to form a network to enhance the exchange of information and facilitate co-operation. As one of its first steps, this Inter-Agency Network for Safety in Biotechnology (IANB) decided to publish this Newsletter.

The IANB held a meeting to assess progress with its work, which was hosted by UNIDO at its headquarters in Vienna, 17-18 April 2000.

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George Tzotzos, UNIDO  
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### CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH (CGIAR)

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) is an association of 58 members, including 22 developing countries, 21 industrialised countries, 12 international/regional development agencies, and 3 foundations, providing strategic direction and financial support to 16 international agricultural research centers located throughout the world. It has four co-sponsors, namely, FAO, UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank. Its international research centers undertake many activities utilising biotechnology as one of the tools to enhance food productivity and environmental sustainability for the benefit of the poor in developing countries. With regard to biosafety, the centers carry out research and services that increase understanding of the scientific evidence underlying safety assessment - as well as other public policy and managerial issues related to these assessments.

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#### ***Recent and upcoming publications:***

 *Agricultural Biotechnology and the Poor 2000*

**Web site:** <http://www.cgiar.org/>

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### CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (CBD)

The most important recent event related to the Convention on Biological Diversity was the outcome of the resumed session of the first extraordinary meeting of the Conference of the Parties (ExCOP 1) in Montreal, Canada, 24-28 January 2000 which concluded the negotiations and adopted the **biosafety protocol**.

This was followed by the fifth meeting of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific, Technical, and Technological Advice (SBSTTA), which was held in Montreal, 31 January - 4 February 2000.

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#### ***Future event:***

- ◆ 5th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD (COP5), 15-26 May in Nairobi, Kenya. One of the highlights of COP5 will be the opening of the Biosafety Protocol for signature.

**Web site:** <http://www.biodiv.org/>

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### INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR GENETIC ENGINEERING AND BIOTECHNOLOGY (ICGEB)

The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) is an autonomous, intergovernmental organization formed by 62 signatory countries of which 43 are full Member States. The Centre is dedicated to advanced research and training in molecular biology and biotechnology. The mandate of the ICGEB is to promote the safe use of biotechnology world-wide with special regard to the needs of the developing countries. The Centre has a Biosafety Unit dedicated to information dissemination and training in biosafety. It organizes annual workshops for scientists in biosafety and manages a bibliographic database of all the main scientific articles and books in biosafety and risk assessment for the environmental release of GMOs.

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**Recent and upcoming publications:**

 *ICGEB Annual Report 1999*

**Recent events:** Two biosafety workshops:

- ◆ 27-31 March 2000, Trieste, ITALY. Workshop: "Biosafety 1. Science and Policy in Risk Assessment of Transgenic Organisms: A Case Study Approach". Organizers: G. Tzotzos (UNIDO), G. Howe (University of Bristol, UK), G. Ferraiolo (ICGEB)
- ◆ 3-8 April 2000, Florence, ITALY. Workshop: "Biosafety2. Advanced Research and Procedures: Case Studies for Designated Experts". Organizers: M. Broggio (IAO), G. Ferraiolo (ICGEB).

**Web site:** ICGEB:

<http://www.icgeb.trieste.it/>

Biosafety WebPages:

<http://www.icgeb.trieste.it/biosafety/>



## JOINT FAO AND WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAM

FAO and WHO have held several Joint Expert Consultations in order to define the scientific question relevant to the assessment of foods derived from biotechnology. From these consultations a number of recommendations for further work has been suggested, and the concept of assessment through comparison to traditional food (substantial equivalence) has been further developed. A new series of Joint Expert Consultations are likely to follow within the next couple of years, the first of these in Geneva May-June 2000, with an aim to develop further safety and nutritional assessments of foods derived from biotechnology. This consultation will, amongst other things, look into the assessment of foods which are not substantially equivalent to traditional counterparts, the assessment of long-term health effects, and the evaluation of transfer of genes.

FAO and WHO will develop a roster of experts from which individuals will be selected to serve at one or more meetings/expert consultations. In this connection, both organizations have issued a "Call for submission of applications for a roster of experts".

The Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme is implemented through the Codex Alimentarius Commission. A particularly important biotechnology development within this system is the Codex Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology. It was established by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission at its meeting in Rome in June 1999.

The first meeting of the Task Force was held 14–17 March, Japan, by courtesy of the Government of Japan. It was chaired by Professor Hiroshi Yoshikura, Director General, Research Institute, International Medical Center of Japan and attended by 225 participants representing 33 Member countries of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and 24 international observer organizations from consumer, industry and environmental groups.


The Task Force set out a programme of work over its four-year period of activity: this will include the development of "over-arching" general principles for risk analysis of foods derived from biotechnology to include such matters as science-based decision-making, pre-market assessment procedures, transparency, post-market monitoring, and other legitimate factors as appropriate.

The Task Force will also prepare specific guidance on the risk assessment of foods derived from biotechnology for food safety and nutrition; the application of the concept of "substantial equivalence"; consideration of long-term health effects and non-intentional effects arising from genetic modification. First priority will be given to foods of plant origin, followed by micro-organisms used directly in foods and then foods of animal origin. Early attention may have to be given to fish.

Adequate and appropriate definitions, using where possible definitions already developed and agreed to in other texts (such as the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety) or by other bodies (such as the Committee on Food Labelling) will be used. Methods of analysis for the detection and identification of foods derived from biotechnology will be compiled.

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**Recent and upcoming publications:**

 *Report of the First Session of the ad Hoc Task Force, ALINORM 01/34*

**Future event:**

- ◆ Second Session of the ad hoc Task Force, Japan, March 2001

**Web site:** <http://www.codexalimentarius.net>



**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
(FAO)**

FAO has a number of activities important to biosafety including work shared with WHO. The joint FAO/WHO work is described in the Joint FAO/WHO section.

FAO also manages important work carried out under the auspices of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) which deals with phytosanitary standards and aspects of "weediness" in genetically-modified plants. The IPPC also prevents the introduction and spread of pests of plants and plant products and promotes control measures. The International Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture deals with preservation of genetic resources, Farmers' Rights and intellectual property rights.

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**WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO)**

WHO attaches high priority to food safety. Apart from Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultations, WHO has also held its own consultations on specific safety questions related to biotechnology. Amongst these was a Consultation on the assessment of marker genes used in plants derived from biotechnology.


The Director-General of WHO has proposed to WHO's governing bodies that the use of biotechnology and its implications for food safety

should be recognized as an important public health issue and WHO should strengthen its capacity to provide a scientific basis for decisions concerning the human health aspects of genetically modified foods. This was unanimously supported by WHO's Executive Board and will be further discussed in the World Health Assembly, the highest governing body of WHO, in May 2000.

WHO is also involved in a broad range of activities related to biotechnology and biosafety in areas such as biologicals, human genetics, xenotransplantation, as well as the prevention and control of zoonoses.

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**Recent and upcoming publications:**

 Report of the Joint FAO/WHO Consultation on Foods Derived from Biotechnology, June 2000

**Future event:**

- ◆ As described in the joint FAO/WHO section.

**Web site:** Food Safety: <http://www.who.int/fsf/>




**OFFICE INTERNATIONAL DES  
EPIZOOTIES (OIE)**

The main objectives of OIE are to inform governments of the occurrence and course of animal diseases throughout the world and to establish international animal health standards for movement of animals and animal products. Some of the standards deal with diseases that have human health and biosafety significance. These standards are approved by the 155 OIE member countries and published in the OIE International Animal Health Code. The OIE also publishes the Manual of Standards for Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines a few of the tests and vaccines use genetically modified organisms. The OIE has had a working group on biotechnology since 1996.

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**Recent and upcoming publications:**

 An update on Zoonoses, in *OIE Scientific and Technical Review* Vol 19 (1)

**Future event:**

- ◆ OIE/IICAB Veterinary Biologics Training Program in Ames, Iowa USA, 5-20 June 2000

**Web site:** <http://www.oie.int/>



**ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC  
CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
(OECD)**

OECD has a number of projects related to biosafety, for example, those organised by the Working Group for the Harmonisation of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology, the Task Force for the Safety of Novel Foods and Feeds, and the Working Party on Biotechnology.

Currently, a major priority for OECD and its 29 Member countries is preparing a response to a request received from the G8 Heads of State and Government in June 1999 to undertake a study on "biotechnology and other aspects of food safety".


OECD has planned five elements in its response to the G8, which should be complete by early May 2000. These elements are:

- A report on the safety assessment of novel foods which is being prepared by the OECD Task Force for the Safety of Novel Foods and Feeds;
- A report on related environmental issues which is being prepared by the Working Group for the Harmonisation of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology;
- A compendium describing national and international food safety systems and activities which is being prepared by the Ad Hoc Group on Food Safety, a group newly established for this purpose;
- The results of an OECD consultation with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that was held on 20 November; and
- The results of the OECD Conference on *GM Food Safety: Facts, Uncertainties and*

*Assessment*, which was hosted by the U.K. in Edinburgh, 28 February to 1<sup>st</sup> March.

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**Recent and upcoming publications:**

 *OECD Biotechnology Update Newsletter*

**Web site:** Biotechnology and Food Safety at OECD:  
<http://www.oecd.org/subject/biotech/>  
BioTrack Online:  
<http://www.oecd.org/ehs/service.htm>



**THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON  
TRADE AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
(UNCTAD)**

UNCTAD has several activities that may be relevant to the subject of safety and biotechnology:

- (a) Through the Division on Investment, Technology and Enterprise Development (DITE), UNCTAD serves as secretariat for the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) that has recently chosen biotechnology as its main focus of work for the present biennium. Under the current programme on biotechnology, the CSTD will convene three panel meetings. The first panel was held in Tehran, 11-13 April 2000, and discussed capacity-building in biotechnology. The second panel will be held in Geneva in July 2000 and will discuss legal and regulatory issues in biotechnology. The third Panel will be convened in November 2000 and will address issues related to public awareness and participation in science policy making.
- (b) Through the Division on International Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities (DITC), UNCTAD carries out the following activities:
  - In the DITC/Trade, Environment and Development branch, capacity building and policy analysis tasks are carried out by UNCTAD in the field of biodiversity and biotechnology among other environmental subjects and in collaboration with UNEP and other relevant organizations.
  - Under its Trade Negotiations and Commercial Diplomacy programme, and in the framework

of its Positive Agenda Initiative, UNCTAD provides policy advice and capacity building, at the request of governments, on issues such as GMOs and international trade in the context of the WTO agreements (TBT, SPS, etc).

- In 1996, UNCTAD launched the BIOTRADE Initiative which is a capacity building programme, at the Division on International Trade (DITC) that aims at stimulating investment and trade in biodiversity products and services as a means of furthering the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Biotechnology is one of the areas in which some country programmes have focused their work, namely in the Andean and Amazonian sub-regions.

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#### **Recent and upcoming publications:**

 see Web sites below

#### **Future events:**

- ◆ CSTD panel meetings in Tehran, 11-13 April 2000, Geneva, July 2000 and in November 2000 (see above).
- ◆ Additional expert meetings on related subjects will be convened by UNCTAD during the period 2000-2001 (to be announced).

**Web sites:** <http://www.unctad.org/en/subsites/dite/>  
[http://www.unctad.org/trade\\_env/](http://www.unctad.org/trade_env/)  
<http://www.biotrade.org/>



### **UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP)**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been a strong supporter of applied biotechnology research in the CGIAR international centers. More recently UNDP has begun support to a major regional biosafety and biotechnology programme in East and Central Africa under the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research

in East and Central Africa (ASARECA). The objective of the biosafety component is to promote the establishment of regionally harmonized and coordinated biosafety guidelines and risk assessment and management mechanisms involving all countries of the sub-region. The initiative is viewed as a pilot test of the approach that may, if successful, be extended to other regions of the world.

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### **UNITED NATIONS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION (UNIDO)**


UNIDO is the Task Manager within the UN system for the follow-up to Chapter 16 of Agenda 21 on the Environmentally Sound Management of Biotechnology. It also had a major role in the establishment of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), now a fully autonomous Intergovernmental Organization.

UNIDO is also responsible for BINAS (the Biosafety Information Network and Advisory Service), which provides the most comprehensive database of biosafety regulations, and information on field releases of GMOs in developing countries and countries in economic transition. BINAS also provides a monthly news-service on developments in biosafety.

BINAS has recently launched a decision support system intended to facilitate the identification of areas of potential biosafety concern prior to release of GMOs. A pilot version of the system, based on hazard identification in the course of releases of genetically modified *Oryza sativa* (rice), *Solanum tuberosum* (potato) and *Brassica napus* (oil seed rape) can be found on line at the BINAS site <<http://binas.unido.org/binas/>>. The system is currently being extended, with help from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Swiss Agency for the Environment to include more crops/genes.

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#### **Recent and publications:**

 The quarterly newsletter, *BINAS News* is archived at the BINAS site (below).

**Web site:** <http://binas.unido.org/binas/>



## WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION (WTO)

The WTO (The World Trade Organization) has no specific biotechnology-related activities at the present time. However, GMO labelling discussions have taken place in the Technical Barrier to Trade Committee, and the SPS Committee had an informal meeting with the Secretariat of the Biosafety Protocol.

In the run-up to the Seattle meeting, a number of Member States had proposed the formation of a WTO Working Group on Biotechnology. This initiative is currently on-hold.

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## JOINT ACTIVITIES

A number of the organizations involved in the IANB, already have existing co-operative activities that should be further enhanced by IANB. Some of these activities are listed below.

BIOBIN is a co-operative activity between UNIDO's BINAS and OECD's BioTrack OnLine. It is intended to facilitate navigation between the complementary information found on these two web sites.

FAO and WHO are jointly responsible for the Codex Alimentarius Committee. The Codex has recently established an Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology.

OECD and WHO recently agreed a Framework for Co-operation between the two organisations. This non-exclusive framework (which covers issues beyond biosafety) also provides for the participation of other organisations on matters of common interest.

The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs is managed by the WTO. The GATT recognises standards that are developed by the Codex, IPPC, and the OIE.

OECD's Working Group for the Harmonisation of Regulatory Oversight in Biotechnology invites the CBD and UNIDO to make input into its draft consensus documents. Similarly, the Task Force for the Safety of Novel Foods and Feeds invites FAO and WHO to make input into its consensus documents.



## THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The World Wide Web is a rich source of information on biosafety.

You can find a lot of information on the work of most Intergovernmental Organisations from the following links:

- Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research  
<http://www.cgiar.org/>
- Convention on Biological Diversity  
<http://www.biodiv.org/>
- International Centre For Genetic Engineering And Biotechnology  
<http://www.icgeb.trieste.it>
- Biotechnology at OECD  
<http://www.oecd.org/subject/biotech/>
- BioTrack OnLine  
<http://www.oecd.org/ehs/service.htm>
- BINAS  
<http://binas.unido.org/binas/>



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