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ICSTI Launches Report on Biotechnology

A report on biotechnology published today (Monday, 18 February, 2002) by the Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (ICSTI) seeks to promote and achieve a dialogue in biotechnology between those who work in the field and the general public, according to Dr. Edward M. Walsh, Chairman, ICSTI, who was speaking at the launch of the report.

Dr. Walsh said that ICSTI established a Task Force chaired by Professor Emer Colleran, NUI, Galway, to prepare the report in order to provide a scientifically credible, balanced and clear document that identifies some of the main public concerns about modern biotechnology, in a national context, and highlights the potential risks and benefits of its application.

Introducing the report Professor Colleran said it discusses a number of important public concerns related to the application of biotechnology including:

- Antibiotic Resistance Genes in GM Plants
- Biotechnology in Food Production
- Biotechnology in Crop Production
- Virus Genes in Genetically Modified Plants
- Gene Therapy
- The Application of Biotechnology for Bioremediation of Contaminated Sites
- Genetic Testing

This report is not intended to be fully comprehensive since not all-current concerns have been fully addressed and other issues are likely to arise in the future.

Among the recommendations is the establishment of a balanced comprehensive information centre for science and technology providing information on current and proposed uses of GMOs (genetically modified organisms).

The reports also supports:

- informed choice and mandatory labelling of GM foods
- that information be made available on applications for release or marketing of GMOs
- that research and clinical trials in gene therapy be regulated
- the establishment of a fully independent biotechnology ethics committee.

Professor Colleran said biotechnology is of strategic importance to the

Irish economy to sustain current economic growth and to enhance the ability of Ireland to become a knowledge-based economy as highlighted by the Technology Foresight reports by the Irish Council for Science, Technology & Innovation, (ICSTI).

The emergence of biotechnology has raised many issues of public concern including the use of GMOs in food production, the effect of GMOs on the environment and the application of biotechnology in healthcare and in new methods of medical therapy.

Although extensive documentation exists on the development and application of traditional and modern biotechnology, ICSTI considers that there is a lack of independently validated and readable information for the general public. The current debate is quite polarised and it is widely accepted that the debate should be more open, transparent and involve all the stakeholders.

In the absence of widely available, independent and credible information on biotechnology, the general public is not given the opportunity to fully understand, and therefore make informed decisions on, the enormously wide range of applications of traditional and modern biotechnology in the agricultural, industrial and healthcare sectors.

To address this issue, the "Report of the Charing Panel of the National Consultation Debate on Genetically Modified Organisms and the Environment", Department of Environment and Local Government, October 1999 and the Report of the Inter-departmental Group on Modern Biotechnology, Government Publications, October 2000, made a number of recommendations in relation to communication of information on Biotechnology.

It was in this context that ICSTI decided to make a contribution to the debate by the publication of this report.

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