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Biotechnology - a force to be reckoned with
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Statement
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The European Commission recently presented the mid-term review of its Strategy for Europe on Life Sciences and Biotechnology 2002-2010. The report advocates a re-orientation of policy, the aim being to promote the development of a competitive and sustainable knowledge-based European bio-economy.

Biosciences and biotechnology can be instrumental in tapping novel, renewable biological energy sources, reducing energy consumption, water consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, and diminishing our dependence on oil. These disciplines play an increasingly important role in the development of new drugs, diagnostics, therapies and vaccines.

Modern biotechnology applications include the production of enzymes, which are an integral component of everyday products like detergents, and the production of bioplastics and biopolymers, which can be degraded far more quickly than conventional polymers, thus reducing waste. Moreover biotechnology is also used for the development of new, life-saving drugs and medical devices. It is constantly discovering new applications, and Europe should be the driver of this development.

At the request of the European Parliament, in April the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission published the study "Bio4EU" that quite clearly demonstrates the substantial impact, both direct and indirect, of biotechnology on European industry.

With a workforce of approximately 96,500 the biotechnology industry in the EU is a major industrial sector meriting stronger public support. Admittedly, many new companies have got off to a successful start, nevertheless their growth is too slow and they are dependent on external capital to finance their research and development. It is often difficult to procure adequate risk capital, and for small and medium-sized enterprises the cost of intellectual property protection is prohibitive. What is more, investment in biosciences and biotechnology is being stepped up worldwide, while in the emerging countries, such as China, Brazil, and India, new competition is proliferating.

In order to implement the re-orientation policy of the Biotechnology Action Plan the Commission recommends focusing measures on five major, interrelated fields:

- Promotion of research and market acquisitions for biotechnology products as part of the 7th Research Framework Programme; creation of trend-setting markets for ecological biotechnology products;

- Stimulating competitiveness by facilitating knowledge transfer and the transformation of research results into market-oriented products;

- Initiation of a factual public debate on the benefits and risks of biosciences and biotechnology;

- Support of the sustainable application of modern biotechnology in agriculture and exploitation of the potential of plant breeding technologies for energy production and environmental protection, particularly for replacing chemical processes and fossil fuels;

- More effective law enforcement and simplified legislation to boost competitiveness.

In the 7th Research Framework Programme one of the priorities is the promotion of a European knowledge-based bio-economy whose development was also the theme of the preceding two conference days of the KBBE Network. One priority of Theme 2 (Food, Farm, Forestry and Fisheries, and Biotechnologies), grouped under the denominator Industrial Biotechnology (sustainable non-food products and processes), has been budgeted with 2 billion euros up to the year 2013 and is expected to make a substantial contribution to achieving this goal. As you know, the EU share of biofuels in the production of transport fuels is forecast to reach a minimum of 10% by 2020. Very different plants and technologies can be used to achieve this goal sustainably. This entails optimizing the second-generation energy plants, such as grasses, woody crops, yeasts, algae and waste products from agriculture and forestry, all sources that will not compete with food production. By 2012 it should also be possible to convert the building blocks of plants and also cellulose and lignin into valuable feedstock for bioethanol and numerous biomaterials, for instance on the basis of polymers that are today still produced petrochemically. The reason for a joint call for tenders for Themes 2 and 5 (Energy) is to promote research in the field of energy plants.

The "Cologne Paper", which was presented here yesterday, also concludes that by 2030 biotechnology will be an important pillar of the European economy, indispensable to economic growth, employment, energy provision and, in general, to maintaining our standard of living in many areas, such as nutrition, industrial processes and medicine. The Paper contains many interesting statements which meet our whole-hearted endorsement.

The global bio-economy will continue to grow. The only imponderables are at what rate, in which part of the earth, and what the key products will be.

Europe is still the leader in key sectors, such as chemistry, fine chemicals, and in industrial enzyme production (70% of global production).

If Europe fails to take the necessary steps and invest in novel, environmentally friendly technologies, we will miss the boat. In that case, other regions, like America and Asia, will reap the benefits of our achievements.

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