

Biotech lobby got millions from Ottawa

Public cash used to alter image

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The Gazette

The federal government has handed out nearly \$6 million in the past six years to the major lobby group for Canada's biotechnology industry.

Publicly available documents on Industry Canada's Web site show that between 1994 and 1999, BIOTECanada and its predecessor, the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology, received annual grants of as much as \$1.1 million under Industry Canada's Technology Outreach Program.

FRONT LINE

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Industry Canada provides funding to many different business groups. What's different here is that part of the public money went directly to changing public perceptions of the biotechnology industry.

"The government is acting as both the protector and the regulator of this industry," said Angela Rickman, deputy director of the Sierra Club of Canada. "They don't even feel they need to pretend to look impartial."

Biotechnology has been much in the news of late. It holds the undeniable promise of medical advances, but many scientists fear that its genetic transformations of life's building blocks pose severe risks to the environment and perhaps to human health. Greenpeace's controversial campaign against "frankenfoods" has crystallized those fears.

BIOTECanada is a coalition with more than 115 members. It brings together universities like McGill and Université de Montréal, company groups like the Quebec Bio-Industries Association, and major corporations like Bayer, Monsanto, Novartis and Merck Frosst.

On its Web site, BIOTECanada now calls itself "the national organization dedicated to promoting a better understanding of biotechnology and the many ways it contributes to improving the quality of life of all Canadians."

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Funding sources sensitive

Quotation about support deleted from Web site

LOBBY

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But the self-description it gave Industry Canada on its most recent lobbyist registration form has a different emphasis: "BIOTECanada is the voice for biotechnology in Canada that fosters the growth, profitability and long-term viability of the Canadian biotechnology industry."

As recently as last fall, BIOTECanada's Web site also gave the following information:

"An Industry Canada-funded study was carried out to examine the biotechnology communications strategies and outreach activities undertaken by the Canadian biotechnology community since 1992. The goal was to provide recommendations for the improvement of public awareness about biotechnology."

In other words, the federal government paid the biotechnology industry to spruce up its beleaguered image. The quotation in the above paragraph is no longer publicly available on the Web site.

Besides paying for some of BIOTECanada's work, Industry Canada is also an official member of the organization. This means, in effect, that Canadians are paying for one branch of the government to join an industry association whose mission involves lobbying other branches of the government.

This year, BIOTECanada registered four official lobbyists.

"The funding was providing ongoing funds to the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology."

Industry Canada's John Jaworski

Danielle Gauthier, a communications officer for BIOTECanada, said the \$5.17 million given under the Technology Outreach Program went "to the broader biotechnology

community at large for the areas of communications, technology transfer, human resources and information and networking."

This money is independent of the \$55 million in federal spending that, as Finance Minister Paul Martin announced in the 1999 budget, is earmarked for biotechnology research.

Biotechnology firms are also eligible for grants under other lavish programs run by Industry Canada, such as the \$150-million Technology Partnerships scheme.

In promoting the Canadian Biotechnology Strategy, Industry Canada says that "these new technologies are expected to have a dramatic impact on industrial competitiveness, economic growth and society itself."

Asked to explain his department's spending on BIOTECanada, John Jaworski, a senior industry development officer with Industry Canada, said that "the funding was providing ongoing funds to the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology, focusing on getting the research community better organized.

"The money was there to promote networks and linkages."

But less than an hour after speaking to *The Gazette*, an embarrassed-sounding Jaworski phoned back to say, "I've been talking with people in admin., and they've suggested very strongly that I not wind up doing this discussion with you.

"They've asked me to get the communications people involved. ... Whatever it is, it looks like it's pretty sensitive," Jaworski said.

Patrice Miron, a spokesman for Industry Canada, said that "we never provided direct funding to BIOTECanada. We provided funding, under a program that doesn't exist any more, to the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology, which was eventually converted into BIOTECanada."

But the Industry Canada Web site shows that while federal financing to BIOTECanada has slowed, it has not stopped.

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Industry Canada's Patrice Miron

In its latest lobbyist registration form, effective Feb. 11, BIOTECanada disclosed that it has been funded to the additional tune of

\$150,000 from CIDA, \$34,000 from IDRC, and \$52,000 from "Industry Canada - projects."

BIOTECanada was officially formed in February 1998, when the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology, or CIB, merged with the Industrial Biotechnology Association of Canada.

Files on the Industry Canada Web site show that in the fiscal year 1994-95, the department gave the CIB \$750,000.

The following year, the amount went up to \$1.1 million. It stayed that way until 1998-9, for a total outlay of \$5.17 million.

Moreover, BIOTECanada received \$250,000 over a five-year period from the federally funded International Development Research Centre and \$289,000 in 1998-99 from the Canadian International Development Agency.

Last month in Montreal, at the international meetings to hammer out a United Nations-sponsored protocol on biosafety, BIOTECanada's president, Joyce Groote, was a prominent voice on behalf of the industry.

She served as chairman for the 2,200-member Global Industry Coalition, which worked closely with Canada and five other nations in the Miami Group to dilute the environmental force of the agreement.

Besides Industry Canada, other branches of the federal government continue to feed money to the biotech industry.

In 1999, for example, a Winnipeg-based biotechnology company called CanGene received of a loan of \$700,000 from the Western Economic Diversification program.

CanGene was one of the companies and associations that banded together in 1998 to form the Biosafety Protocol Consortia.

That group, which included Monsanto and BIOTECanada among its members, hired Rick Walter (president of Biotech Consulting Group Inc.) to act as a lobbyist in Ottawa.

Walter was executive director of the Canadian Institute of Biotechnology in the years when it was receiving the most funds from Industry Canada.

The federal largesse extended to other departments, too.

A lobbyist registration form from 1997 shows that the CIB was working "under contract for a number of government departments to complete projects" in such areas as "networking, communications, public awareness and education."