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Women Targeted by the Biotech Industry

DWIGHT SMITH (CBC-Radio): Here at home, the biotech industry and the federal government are being criticized for holding closed door meetings. Some of the country's biggest biotech industries, such as Monsanto and Novartis, met yesterday in Ottawa with the Agriculture Minister. David McKie reports.

DAVID MCKIE (Reporter): Government memos from departments such as Agriculture and the Privy Council Office, have expressed concerns about the need to consult the public that is already sceptical about some aspects of biotechnology. Edna Einsodil teaches communications at the University of Calgary. She recently headed up a special citizens panel that examined biotechnology. She says the closed door meetings send the wrong signal to citizens who expect to be consulted.

EDNA EINSODIL (University of Calgary): That is definitely going to be a problem as far as public perception is going to be concerned.

LYLE VANCLIEF (Minister of Agriculture): It's just a regular meeting that I have... This was a convenient place to hold it here.

MCKIE: On his way into yesterday's meeting, Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief said he was just going to listen to the concerns of the industry. He denied that the two sides were trying to devise ways to sell a technology that's creating a lot of controversy. Devise

VANCLIEF: That is not the purpose of the meeting at all. I just want to have a dialogue and hear their views and... advice or thoughts that they may have.

MCKIE: Some of those thoughts were expressed during their first meeting seven months ago. According to a summary of that gathering, there was talk about targeting women with messages about biotech since they are the ones within families who make the key decisions about food. There was also talk of using women's magazines and early morning television as vehicles for the message. Denny Warriner represents citizens on the committee that advises Vanclief on biotech matters.

DENNY WARRINER (Citizens Advisory Committee): I know that they have begun that sort of strategy and I think in some cases it's a little too late.

MCKIE: Too late, says Warriner, because citizens have grown suspicious of the information about biotech coming from the industry and government.

David McKie, CBC News, Ottawa.