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Verheugen goes alternative

A high-level EU conference on alternatives is being sponsored by the Commission Vice-President, Gunter Verheugen.

Commission Vice President Gunter Verheugen, who is also Commissioner for enterprise and industry, takes a particular interest in alternatives to animal testing and, together with Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik, is holding a 'Europe goes Alternative' conference at the European Parliament in Brussels on 7 November. Speakers will include high-level representatives and experts from industry, animal welfare organisations, academia, and national, European and international institutions.

According to the Commission, the objectives of the conference are to demonstrate that the European Union keeps animal welfare high on the political agenda and remains in the lead for animal protection; to demonstrate industry's approach to actively research alternative methods; to demonstrate progress made in the area of alternative methods to animal tests at EU and international level; and to identify further possibilities to improve development and validation of alternative methods.

The conference is aimed at the all three R's rather than just replacement alternatives. One important aspect of the event will be the launch of a Declaration on the Three R's with backing from the Commission and the pharmaceutical, chemical and cosmetic industries.

The conference will focus on policy issues, says the Commission. "It is seen as complementary to the 5th World Congress on Alternatives & Animal Use in Life Sciences, which took place in Berlin from 21-25 August 2005 and addressed mainly scientific issues."

The draft programme and on-line registration can be found at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/events/animal_tests/index_en.htm

Impact assessment for the revised Directive

The Commission calls for tenders for impact assessment of the effect of revision of Directive.

On 5 July 2005, the European Commission published an open call for tender to carry out a preliminary impact assessment of the revision of Directive 86/609. The closing date for tenders was 14 September 2005.

According to the Commission, the objective of the impact assessment is: "To provide targeted support to the revision of the Directive

86/609/EEC on the protection of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes by analysing, critically reviewing and assessing policy options, their impacts, testing the conclusions and providing justifiable and quantitative (where possible) indications of the related benefits and costs.

The tender says that the contractor should pay particular attention to Members State and Stakeholder inputs, especially the effects on industry competitiveness and research in EU, administrative compliance cost and socio-economics on one hand, and improvement in science and welfare of animals, the animal lives and individual animal suffering/distress on the other.

The impact assessment must be completed in nine months, and, according to the Commission, this means that legislation is likely to be drafted by the end of 2006.

UK Guinea pig farm closes

Breeder to shut down after enduring the longest-running extremist campaign to date.

On 23 August, the family at the heart of one of longest-running campaigns of intimidation by animal rights activists announced that they were to stop breeding guinea pigs for medical research. Christopher and John Hall said that they were had had enough and would discontinue the breeding the animals at Darley Oaks Farm, Staffordshire in the North of England. A prolonged campaign of hate mail, hoaxes, and harassment culminated in the theft of the body of Gladys Hammond, mother-in-law of Christopher Hall from a graveyard in October 2004. To date the body has not been recovered.

The Halls hope their decision will mean Mrs Hammond's remains will be returned. "David Hall and Partners' involvement in breeding guinea pigs for biomedical research will cease at the end of 2005," the family said in a statement. "The business, which has operated for over three decades, will undergo a phased closure until then to ensure the welfare of animals involved. The business has continued during a sustained protest from animal rights extremists for six years, which included the desecration of the grave of Gladys Hammond last October. We now hope that, as a result of this announcement, those responsible for removing Gladys' body will return her so she can lie once again in her rightful resting place."

Some tactics used by protestors had been peaceful. But others included hate mail, malicious phone calls, fireworks, a paedophile smear campaign, paint stripper on cars and arson attacks. The family had to give up going to their local pub after threats to staff working there. Since January 2003, Staffordshire police have received reports of more than 460 incidents at the farm or related targets. The farm's owners, workers, and any business in the area which has had contact with them have all come under attack from animal rights activists. In addition to the local pub, the fuel supplier and even the farm's domestic cleaner have been targeted by violent extremists.

Commenting on the closure, the UK BioIndustry Association said: "The BIA applauds the Hall family's resilience in the face of a violent campaign of intimidation by animal extremists. The widespread public revulsion at the campaign, which has included the theft of a family member's remains, demonstrates that these deplorable tactics

go far beyond the boundaries of legitimate protest. Commitment from the government on tackling animal extremism, together with new legislation, is a move in the right direction. It seems likely that protestors will now use the same tactics at other animal breeding establishments. "

🔗 EFSA finalises report on 86/609

A report on changes to Directive 86/609 is about to be published by the European Food Safety Authority

The Animal Health and Welfare Committee of the European Food Safety Authority will soon produce their report on a number of issues raised in the preparations for drafting the revision of Directive 86/609 on the protection of laboratory animals. At the request of the European Commission, the committee, under the chairmanship of Professor David Morton, of Birmingham University, UK, looked at the following questions:

- The sentience of invertebrate species, and the cut-off point for experiments involving fetal and embryonic forms of vertebrate species;
- In which cases animals used in experiments should be purpose-bred;
- Which are the most humane methods of euthanasia, and for which species.

Three working groups were set up to address these questions with relevant experts being appointed as members. Experts were chosen on the basis of their scientific expertise or relevant experience, and the suggestions of stakeholder groups were taken into account.

A draft report was sent, in confidence, to the stakeholder organisations in July and there was a stakeholder meeting held on 31 August. Many written comments were received and were subject to a lively debate at the meeting.

We have been informed that the report will be published, on the EFSA web site, in November.

🔗 Media training for UK scientists

A seminar is being held to help UK scientists speak in the media about animal research

On 31 October the UK Science Media Centre will hold a seminar 'Making the Case for Animal Research in the Media'. This will take place in Central London and run from 15.30 (coffee and registration) to 18.00 (cocktail). The Science Media Centre is an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories and views of the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines. It is based at the Royal Institution, in the West End of London.

The seminar is intended for scientists directly or indirectly involved in

animal research and who accept the need to make the case to the public but are currently reluctant to do so – either because of concerns about the activities of animal rights activists or simply because they lack confidence to make the case in a potentially hostile atmosphere of a media interview. The seminar is free, although participants would be expected to meet their own travel and accommodation expenses.

The speakers include:

- Chris Higgins – Director of MRC Clinical Sciences Centre
- Clive Page – Chairman of the Animal Science Group of the BioSciences Federation
- Simon Festing – Director of Research Defence Society
- Vicky Cowell – Seriously Ill for Medical Research
- Wendy Jarrett – Coalition for Medical Progress
- Mike Robbins – Parkinson's patient
- Superintendent Steve Pearl - a police specialist in animal rights activism
- Fergus Walsh – BBC Medical correspondent
- Cherry Lewis – Head of Media at Bristol University

The event will be followed by a wine reception from 6-7pm. There is no charge for attendance. For further information or to register email Tom Durie: smctemp@ri.ac.uk

EBRA at CER 2005

EBRA has been selected to run a session at the prestigious EU conference on science communication

The European Commission hosts Europe's leading science communication conference "Communicating European Research 2005" in Brussels on 14 and 15 November. EBRA was selected from over 150 organisations to run a session at the conference on "Communicating difficult issues in medical research".

The session will cover animal research, stem cell research and brain research with participants from the European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology and the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies. The session will be run as a roundtable discussion of the experiences of scientists who have been active in communicating in these areas, with the aim of encouraging wider participation in public dialogue.

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