

Activist sees good in biotechnology

But danger of abuses makes him a watchdog

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WASHINGTON — The world's gene pool will be the "green gold of the 21st century." Congress and entrepreneurs should step up research, and the world should prepare for the "age of biology."

The source of these observations: Jeremy Rifkin, enemy No. 1 of the biotechnology industry, widely reviled "foe" of gene science, filer of countless suits against biotech researchers and companies.

A sudden conversion? A repentant confession?

No, answered Rifkin in an interview in his Washington office — surrounded by books he has written with names like "Beyond Beef," "Biosphere Politics" and "The Green Lifestyle Handbook." Rather — it is all a case of skewed perceptions. "When I talk about what I am against, everyone listens," Rifkin said. "When I say what I am for, every reporter puts down his pen."

To the likely surprise of many who regard Rifkin an anti-progress gadfly, there is much in the emerging science of genetic manipulation that finds his blessing.



RIFKIN: Biotech's former arch enemy

Make no mistake. There is plenty he is against: splicing genes between animals to create new species; patenting new life forms; biotechnology in defense research; injection of cows with genetically engineered hormones to boost milk production; deliberate release of genetically engineered organisms into the environment.

He vigorously opposes plans to put a genetically engineered tomato — designed to taste better and dubbed the Flav'r Savr — in supermarkets by October. He already has lined up more than 2,500 top restaurant chefs to boycott the product and claims he has 20,000 volunteers ready to picket any market that sells it.

But those views, Rifkin laments, and his readiness to espouse them in any forum, have earned him the image of a nay-saying opponent of progress who would have everyone ride bicycles with natural-rubber tires and eat only cabbage certified to have died a natural death.

"In fact, I envision a sophisticated, technological, post-modern economy emerging," Rifkin said. "I am not trying to turn back the clock."

Like the most eager executive with biotech pioneers such as Monsanto Corp. or CalGene Inc., Rifkin sees the growing understanding of the biological world as the basis of an economy that will eclipse the oil-based one of the last century.

"In a consumptive, petrochemical-based economy, the building blocks are oil and chemicals," he said. "In a sustainable economy, the building blocks are biology's diversity — its genetic diversity."

Rifkin sees the "Genome Project," the massive, federally funded mapping of all human genes, as a key to a far more

healthy society.

Rifkin sketches at length his vision of a renaissance for farmers and consumers being born from the revolution in biological understanding.

"We see the same things," he said of those he usually is skirmishing with. "It's just that we see them from a different world view."

In medicine, the current focus of research is on finding disease-causing genes that can be "switched off" through gene therapy as a cure. Rifkin would prefer to see more research on the environmental "triggers" that allow a gene to cause disease, creating new opportunities for preventive medicine.

In agriculture, understanding of genes and genetic function could translate into enhancements to traditional plant breeding. But those possibilities are inadequately explored in favor of gene-splicing that allows for patenting and higher potential profits, in Rifkin's view.

Natural plant breeding, aided by high-tech science, could mean a boon for small farmers with far more environment-friendly farming, he suggests. In fact, the market trends are moving toward more consumer demand for natural products, and that's where the money will be made, not in the complicated gene-splicing now drawing investors' millions, he said.

"The corporations have misread the market," he said, noting the fastest growing supermarket chains are those selling organic products.

"Is this all so radical?" he asks. "It's a common-sense approach. It's an exciting vision of a post-modern world."