



## BIOS to break biology's tech barrier

**Karen Dearne**

October 5, 2004

**BIOLOGISTS are launching an open source movement to break the stranglehold of large corporations that dominate the biotech field and put vital science research tools into the public domain.**

The Biological Innovation for Open Society (BIOS) initiative, funded by a \$US1 million (\$1.3 million) grant from the Rockefeller Foundation announced last week, aims to make technology more readily available to biologists everywhere.

BIOS supporters say the latest genetics and biology tools should be freely available to researchers over the internet, but instead access is typically restricted by commercial patents and prohibitive licensing fees.

Australian molecular geneticist Richard Jefferson is behind the BIOS plan to "spur an open source movement" in life sciences similar to the collaborative open source community that has grown up alongside the computer software industry.

Researchers are "increasingly frustrated by a growing forest of patents around innovations in the biological sciences", according to a Nature report and editorial featured in its latest issue.

"There is discontent that innovations from publicly funded scientists are being sold to private companies and locked up in exclusive licensing," the prestigious science journal says.

"Concern is mounting that poorer nations are being further disenfranchised by richer countries' ownership and control of enabling technologies. "Even purely academic scientists are not immune from the effect of licensing obstacles on new techniques."

The grant will allow BIOS to bring together a portfolio of free research tools and build a database of patent information.

IBM is contributing hardware and software to the initiative.

Professor Jefferson, chairman of the Canberra-based Centre for the Application of Molecular Biology to International Agriculture (CAMBIA), says BIOS will cover all forms of biological innovation.

Already on the slate are agricultural and animal-breeding tools, genetic resources, medical treatments and environmental remedies. The initial BIOS portfolio will include a new method, developed by CAMBIA, for transferring genes into plants using modified bacterial species. Professor Jefferson says this technique will sidestep patents held by biotech firm Monsanto. CAMBIA's approach to open source has also been recognised by Computer Sciences Corp in its new report, Open Source: Open for Business.

"CAMBIA's goal is to help local communities solve their agricultural and environmental problems by unblocking the intellectual property logjam that has stymied the full potential of modern genetics," CSC says.

"Open source is central to CAMBIA's mission: the open access toolkit has been likened to Linux."

Meanwhile, Nature notes, the success of BIOS depends on active participation by scientists willing to share information and contribute research tools, as well as financial support from private and public backers.

*The Australian*

***This report appears on NEWS.com.au.***

**Terms | Privacy policy** Copyright 2004 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT+10).