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DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

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Telegram to: Congressman Paul Rogers
Congressman Harley Staggers
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Gentlemen:

Three years ago I and others expressed concern about the indiscriminate use of recombinant DNA (RD) techniques and recommended that certain experiments be deferred until the question of potential hazards and how to deal with them could be better evaluated. More than three years of experience and a more in-depth analysis of these questions has led me to change my assessment of the risks. There is virtually unanimous agreement amongst experts in infectious disease and epidemiology that the enfeebled strain of E.coli K12 used for RD experiments cannot be transformed into an infectious or pathogenic organism or even into an human inhabitant by a bit of foreign DNA. Specially modified derivatives of strain K12 and plasmid or bacteriophage vectors that are now available provide additional assurance of safety. Hence, my initial concern that RD research could result in the widespread dissemination of novel organisms and create potential hazards for man and the environment is not supported by presently available evidence. On the other hand RD methods have led to impressive scientific advances that promise important revelations about the function of genes in health and disease and bring closer the reality of practical benefits from this research.

In view of the rapid advance of scientific knowledge by RD techniques and the as yet only speculative nature of the hazards, I regard the approach taken in HR7879 as unwarranted and unnecessary. It is my judgement that the proposed legislation is also unwise since, if enacted, HR7857 will surely inhibit rather than foster basic research on important biological and medical problems; consequently, it will delay the inevitable rewards for the public welfare. In my view the application or modification of already existing mechanisms that guard the public against known hazards is a more prudent way of dealing with any remaining anxieties about RD research.