BASF and Freiburg University to collaborate on plant biotechnology

Ludwigshaven, Germany
December 21, 1998

The Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg, BASF Aktiengesellschaft, Ludwigshafen, and private lecturer Dr. Ralf Reski have concluded a cooperation agreement in the field of plant biotechnology. The object of this scientific collaboration is to elucidate the biological function of plant genes. The cooperation will involve expenditures of more than DM 30 million over the next four years. BASF will finance the salaries and operating inputs for 40 scientists and laboratory technicians. Freiburg University will provide the laboratory building and the infrastructure required for operating the laboratories.

Dr. Ralf Reski, holder of the Heisenberg Scholarship awarded by the German Research Association, and his working group have been able to specifically exchange individual genes for the first time in plants by homologous recombination. A similar method is already of very great importance in pharmaceutical research and development. Through the cooperation agreement that has now been concluded, it will be possible to take advantage of this technique broadly in plant biotechnology worldwide for the first time. The partners to the agreement are hoping that the discovery and identification of new genes will be able to make crop plants for example more resistant to drought, cold and attack by pests.

For the University of Freiburg, the collaboration with BASF means a further strengthening of its biotechnological competence. Particularly in the field of plant sciences, the university has internationally renowned scientists with working groups in the Faculties of Biology, Forest Sciences and Chemistry and Pharmacy.

Biotechnological research in Freiburg also influences the trinational course of studies for biotechnology (Freiburg - Basle - Strasbourg), which previously had only permitted a diploma. Now it is worth considering the possibilities of a course leading to a degree.

The President of Albert-Ludwig University, Professor Dr. Wolfgang Jäger, has therefore made every endeavor to realize this unique opportunity for young scientists to become familiar at the university with the latest scientific and industrial knowledge and methods in the field of biotechnological research.

For BASF, this collaboration is a further important element in its rapidly growing platform for plant biotechnology. In August 1998, the company announced the move into this technology and the foundation of two research companies. Building on its broad agricultural competence as a manufacturer of fertilizers, crop protection agents and products for animal nutrition, BASF is interested in plants with improved cultivation and quality properties.

Crops with improved agronomic properties are able, for example, to survive periods of drought or cold. Crops with improved components - vitamins for instance or polysaturated fatty acids - can be the base for healthier food for humans and animals.

Biotechnology is assuming an ever greater role in research at BASF. Some 20 percent of expenditure on life science research goes into this technology. Altogether, this will be more than half a billion DM in the next three years.

BASF earns about a fifth of its sales with its life science operations, which include pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals (as for example vitamins) and products for agriculture. BASF wants to energetically expand these operations, which are only slightly affected by economic cycles.