

Column Joost van Kasteren

Trips eradicated

Trips are minute insects that feed on plant juices. Dutch horticulturalists know what to do when they encounter them in their greenhouses: eradicate them either by deploying even tinier insects or poisoning them with synthetic pesticides. TRIPs is also short for 'trade related intellectual property rights', an agreement between the member states of the WTO, to protect intellectual property through Western style patent laws and/or breeder rights. Thanks to TRIPs, life-science companies get a temporary monopoly on the market so that they can earn back the investments they made while developing pharmaceuticals and new plant varieties. TRIPs is also under heavy fire, not from tiny insects but from millions of poor people who cannot afford expensive drugs or genetically modified seeds. Following the threat by South Africa to import cheap generic drugs against HIV/AIDS, several countries in South East Asia are under

pressure to revoke patents on plant varieties. Can we blame them? They are confronted with millions of poor farmers that want to use the new varieties, but cannot afford them. Chances are that if there is no change in the way intellectual property rights are protected, the big markets in India and China might very well abolish the patent system as such. The Netherlands did so in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century thus stimulating industrialisation. The Philips brothers for instance founded their company, because they could circumvent the patents on light bulbs. If the life-science companies think they can go on making big profits from their patents, they obviously have no idea what is happening in the world. Instead of counting their patent applications they had better rethink their business philosophy and find ways of welcoming 3 billion poor people as their customers, instead of only serving people in the richer parts of the world.

First round Centres of Excellence

Following the advice of the international jury, the supervisory board of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative has selected 4 Letters of Intent that are suitable to be elaborated into a business plan. These Letters were submitted by:

- **Cancer Genomics** prof.dr. A. Berns
- **The Centre for Biosystems Genomics** prof.dr. W. Stiekema
- **Kluyver Centre for Genomics of Industrial Fermentation** prof.dr. J.T. Pronk
- **Multifactorial Diseases: Common Determinants, Unifying Technologies** prof.dr. G.J.B. van Ommen

Agenda

- May 1-5** **Oncogenomics 2002, Dublin, Ireland**
<http://www.nhgri.nih.gov/CONF/Oncogenomics2002/>
- May 7-9** **Neurogenomics 2002, Chapel Hill, North Carolina**
<http://www.neurogenomics2002.com/preview.html>
- May 13-14** **Impact of Genomics on Medicine, Munich, Germany**
Info: www.healthtech.com/2002/hge/index.htm
- May 15-16** **Pharmacogenomics/Pharmacoproteomics Europe, Munich, Germany**
Info: www.healthtech.com/2002/mpe/index.htm
- June 2-6** **First International Conference on Legume Genomics and Genetics: Translation to crop improvement, Minneapolis, MN**
<http://www.agro.agri.umn.edu/iclgg/>
- June 14-15** **Genetic Privacy and Discrimination, Rochester, NY**
www.urmc.rochester.edu/cpe/sgpd/index.html
- June 22-29** **International Conference 'Genomics, Proteomics and Bioinformatics for Medicine' Moscow, Russia**
www.ibmh.msk.su/gpbm2002/
- November 13** **Genomics Momentum 2002**
genomics@publimarket.nl



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April 2002 topics:

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Supervisory Board completed

First round Centres of Excellence

Financial impulse for bioinformatics

Jury president Leena Peltonen impressed with quality of proposals

Budget for knowledge infrastructure substantially increased

news genomics.nl

To exchange information on science, society and business in genomics in the Netherlands.

Editorial

With great pleasure I introduce to you the first issue of News@genomics.nl, the newsletter of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative (Nationaal Regie-organ Genomics). Through this newsletter, we aim to inform all members of the genomics network on the latest developments within the Dutch Genomics community, the Centres of Excellence and the Initiative. In addition, the newsletter will function as a discussion platform for everyone involved in genomics in the Netherlands. The Netherlands Genomics Initiative was established in January 2002 with a very clear mission: to bring together the opportunities offered by genomics research and the specific strengths of the research community in the Netherlands in such a way that within five years, the Netherlands will possess a world-class knowledge infrastructure on genomics, firmly embedded in society.

This infrastructure, formed around a limited number of Genomics Centres of Excellence, will subsequently fuel cutting-edge research, which in turn will create a continuous flow of new economic activities. The Netherlands Genomics Initiative aims to cover the complete chain of innovation, from fundamental research to industrial applications. It is expected that fundamental genomics research will result in major opportunities for improving healthcare, for producing safe and healthier food products and in finding new, more sustainable production methods for the industry. The Netherlands cannot afford to miss out on these opportunities, as has been emphasised by the Netherlands government in its July 2001-decision on genomics research. Therefore I am glad to see that, looking at the current state-of-affairs in the Netherlands, genomics has high priority with an increasing amount of people. However, we have only just started, a huge amount of work still needs to be done. A world-class genomics infrastructure is not built overnight. The Netherlands Genomics Initiative will do everything in its power to stimulate and facilitate genomics research. But we cannot do it on our own, it will take a large effort from everyone involved. So I invite you all to join us in this Initiative and get this much-needed genomics infrastructure off the ground.

Peter Folstar

Financial impulse for bioinformatics

A grant of K€ 900 from NWO (NWO is the Dutch acronym for the Netherlands organisation for Scientific Research) will be used for setting up the Bioinformatics Application Service Provider, or Bio-ASP. This central expertise and service centre for bioinformatics will offer cutting-edge ICT services to the complete Dutch genomics community to facilitate their research. Through a virtual network, developed by the University of Amsterdam, participants will have access to databases and software. The network can also be used to perform complex calculations

and compare databases. In addition, the Bio-ASP will also be responsible for co-ordinating educational activities on bioinformatics. The services currently offered by the Centre for Molecular and Biomolecular Informatics in Nijmegen will be incorporated within the Bio-ASP. There will be close co-operation with the Netherlands Genomics Initiative to ensure that the services on offer fit the demands of the genomics research programmes.

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Personnel

Genomics Initiative director Peter Folstar has collected a small team. A short introduction:



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Social Sciences willing to invest in genomics

In the NWO programme 'The social component of genomics research', aimed at stimulating ethical, legal and social research in the genomics area, the first round of both essays and project proposals has taken place. From the 49 project proposals, 22 applicants were invited to develop a project submission. All themes within the programme were represented, according to Fons Werrij, chairman of the programme committee. It appears that the social sciences are willing to invest in genomics, as many of the project proposals described the development of their own disciplines in order to enable a fruitful investigation of the genomics field.

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Supervisory Board completed

The Supervisory Board of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative was installed on January 1, 2002. One of the main objectives of the Supervisory Board will be control and supervision of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative. The Board will take the final decisions about financing of the research projects. The members of the Supervisory Board are: Mr. I.W. Opstelten, Mayor of the City of Rotterdam; Professor J.M. Bensing, Utrecht University; Professor K. Debackere, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; Professor S.W.J. Lamberts, University Hospital Rotterdam – Dijkzigt; Drs. J. Peelen, formerly Board of Directors Unilever; Professor E. Veltkamp, Unilever Research Vlaardingen; Professor B. Witholt, Institute of Biotechnology, Zurich. The Board will meet four times a year.

Budget for knowledge infrastructure substantially increased

In March the government has decided to substantially increase the budget for reinforcing the Dutch knowledge infrastructure in the Netherlands (ICES/KIS). For the next period, M[€] 805 will be available, compared to M[€] 211 during 1998-2002. The government has identified 6 research themes. One of the themes is 'Breakthroughs in health, food, gene- and biotechnology (a.o. genomics)'. The government will issue a call for proposals within the next few months. The deadline for

submission is scheduled for December 2002. Allocation of the budget across the different research themes is expected in June 2003.

The Netherlands Genomics Initiative will collectively submit the proposals for genomics research. Therefore the Genomics Initiative will issue its own call for proposals in due course.

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Jury president Leena Peltonen impressed with quality of proposals

Prof.Dr. Leena Peltonen chaired the international jury responsible for selecting the first proposals for a Genomics Centre of Excellence. Out of the 11 submitted proposals, the jury selected four applicants for the next stage. Peltonen's research group at the Gonda Centre of the University of California Los Angeles focuses on the functional analysis of gene defects that affect the central nervous system, as well as the characterisation of genes predisposing to common diseases like multiple sclerosis and schizophrenia. (www.genetics.ucla.edu)

Leena Peltonen: 'I was most impressed that The Netherlands make such a huge investment in genomics and I was equally impressed with the high quality of the proposals.

The Netherlands really can be extremely competitive in genomics research if they target their actions carefully and choose their niches. The collaborations between clinics and basic science provide competitive advantage. Many groups could be global leaders.'

How did the jury go about selecting the proposals?

'The number one priority was scientific excellence followed by the infrastructure and management, because you cannot

perform well when there is a bad infrastructure or a lack of vision in the management. Understandably, business opportunities cannot always be developed. First you have to perform well scientifically and then you can start building something solid with competent industrial partners.'

What about the communication aspects?

'Many proposals contained elements of communication with society like discussion and debate. Perhaps there should be a targeted search for this element because the social aspect was typically glued to the top of the proposals, like a stamp, not as a part of the real research plan.'

First Centres of Excellence-proposals selected

It is the aim of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative to establish a limited number of Centres of Excellence, which will form the backbone of the genomics infrastructure. These centres are based on co-operations between universities, research institutes and industrial groups, and are the suppliers of the genomics hardware.

The call for Letters of Intent was first announced during the Genomics Momentum 2001. The Dutch genomics community actively responded to the call and no less than 11 Letters of Intent were submitted in this first round. An international Jury was established, comprising renowned experts in the relevant scientific fields, industrial research and social and ethical aspects of genomics. During a two-day meeting in March, the jury assessed the proposals. In addition, all applicants were invited to the meeting to present their plans. Using the selection of the jury, the Supervisory Board decided which proposals will go on to the next round. The results are published on the last page of this newsletter. A second call for Centres of Excellence is planned for autumn 2002.