

September 27, 2011

City Council
City of Alameda
2263 Santa Clara Avenue
Alameda, CA 94501

City Council
City of Albany
1000 San Pablo Avenue
Albany, CA 94706

City Council
City of Berkeley
2180 Milvia Street
Berkeley, CA 94704

City Council
City of Emeryville
1333 Park Avenue
Emeryville, California 94608

City Council
City of Oakland
1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza
Oakland, CA 94612

City Council
City of Richmond
440 Civic Center Plaza
Richmond, CA 94804

Dear City Council Members:

We are writing to raise concerns about the proposed second campus of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) and the U. C. Berkeley Synthetic Biology Institute (SBI) that is being considered for one of your respective cities. Much of the research that will be conducted in this laboratory will be on the emerging technology called synthetic biology. Synthetic biology is an extreme form of genetic engineering that is attempting to create novel, potentially self-replicating artificial life forms from synthesized DNA. The risks this research poses to worker safety, public health and the environment are currently being ignored.

While some find promise in synthetic biology for manufacturing new products and helping us to better understand biological processes, it is an inherently risky technology. Synthetic biology research could result in enhanced virulence in existing hosts, heightened ability to infect a wider range of hosts, and resistance to antimicrobials, antivirals, vaccines and other treatment or containment modalities.

Laboratory accidents are much more common in the U.S. than most people realize and often go unreported. If there were an accidental release of engineered organisms in this lab, the health of workers, the environment and entire communities could be put at risk. Already, the current lack of adequate safety protocols and biocontainment within rDNA labs has caused serious illness and death. Since synthetic biology's objective lies in engineering novel life forms and products with the potential to interact with human biology and other cellular processes, we believe this research poses dangers (both from accidental and deliberate uses) unforeseen in the regulatory framework of standard rDNA research.

Therefore, before any decisions are made on a specific site for this new lab, we believe a comprehensive, independent and transparent safety and risk analysis capable of assessing these threats must be completed. It is simply unacceptable to allow the laboratory to self-regulate. Moreover, it must be ascertained whether such research is even appropriate near urban centers. Safety regulations and procedures must be created and tailored to address the novel aspects of this new science, including whistleblower protections and forums for workers to raise concerns,

and the costs to any municipality of an appropriate public safety infrastructure must be identified.

Finally, independent regulatory oversight must be assured, particularly because both public and private entities will be operating at the lab. Every stage of this process must be open to and involve the public, including town hall meetings to discuss and address health and safety issues.

The Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the U. C. Berkeley Synthetic Biology Institute must undertake the burden of proof as to whether their laboratory will be safe before any community can make an informed decision about inviting it to break ground in their backyard.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Humane Biotechnology

BioFuel Watch

California Coalition for Worker's Memorial Day

Center for Food Safety

Center for Genetics and Society

Council for Responsible Genetics

Friends of the Earth

Global Justice Ecology Project

International Center for Technology Assessment

National Injured Worker's Network

National Workrights Institute

Pesticide Action Network of North America

*If you have any questions or need any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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Council for Responsible Genetics

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