

\$13M polishes biotech image, critics charge

Health advocates say federal funds should go to testing, labelling GM foods

BY JACK AUBREY

The Canadian government has pumped more than \$13 million since 1997 into a "public relations campaign" to boost the image of the country's fledgling biotechnology industry, including more than \$1.1 million on polling, health advocates say government documents reveal.

Bradford Duplisea, a researcher for the Canadian Health Coalition, said documents he has obtained through Access to Information show the government has been spending money on communications instead of testing and labelling genetically modified foods, as desired by Canadians.

"It's been a concerted campaign to stem the flow of bad publicity the industry had been receiving. And this is just the tip of the iceberg -- there is possibly another \$10 million worth of contributions that I've identified," said Mr. Duplisea.

He has put together a chart dubbed the "Biotech Money Tree," directed to such groups and efforts as the Consumers Association of Canada (\$1.3 million), BIOTE Canada (\$5.7 million), and the Food Safety and You Booklet (\$2.5 million).

Meanwhile, the Canadian Biotechnology Secretariat has contracted Pollara for \$1.06 million for twice-annual polls over the past four years, and paid the firm \$44,000 to report on findings.

Duplisea says taxpayers are paying for polling that should be financed by the biotech industry.



He said the polls have shown time and again that Canadians want testing and labelling, but instead have been the target of an aggressive public relations campaign.

John Olsthoorn, a spokesman for the Canadian Biotechnology Secretariat, denies the government has been working with the industry to promote biotechnology. He said the polls are released to the public and industry at the same time.

He said Pollara and Earnscliffe, which has close ties to prime minister-designate Paul Martin, were hired following through the competitive Public Works process. Mr. Olsthoorn said next year's expenditure on polling, which will be conducted by the same firms, will be reduced slightly since it is being transformed into a larger, annual Canada-U.S. survey.

The first of the two-country surveys, which was taken earlier this year, showed the percentage of Canadians who accept biotechnology continues to grow, but not as fast as that of Americans.

It also shows Americans have pulled ahead of Canadians in awareness and acceptance of biotechnology, including cloning and genetically modified foods, as both countries race for the economic benefits of the new science.

Mr. Duplisa said even though the polls have consistently shown that more than 85 per cent of the population supports mandatory labelling for genetically modified foods, the government continues to drag its heels.

Mr. Olsthoorn said labelling is just one of numerous issues studied in the massive poll. He said the poll is cost-effective since numerous departments, including health, industry and agriculture, contribute to the questions.

In the recent Canada-U.S. poll, it possibly revealed that the Canadian government could use a public relations campaign on its handling of the issue.

While 40 per cent of Americans believe their government probably does an effective job of regulating biotech products, only 28 per cent of Canadians said the same thing.