

Lobbying & Law

Cloning Critics Split

By Neil Munro

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■ Abortion views shape the debate.

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The reason for the divide, advocates say, is that the factions and their political allies stand on different sides of the abortion controversy.

Senior Democratic legislators and major Democratic interest groups firmly oppose any legal protections for human embryos, including cloned human embryos. Conversely, most Republican legislators are reluctant to antagonize anti-abortion groups by voicing support for scientific or commercial use of human embryos.

In contrast, few Republican legislators even participate in the animal-cloning debate, in part because they dislike regulation of the agriculture and food industries. Meanwhile, Democratic legislators risk little when they offer to mediate the animal-cloning debate among biotech, consumer, and environmental groups.

With the political parties divided by abortion, the biotech sector has gradually advanced its agenda. For example, after years of opposition from a coalition of consumer and environmental groups, the Food and Drug Administration announced in early January that milk and meat derived from cloned animals are safe to eat. The decision was welcomed by the Biotechnology Industry Organization, which had pushed hard for FDA ap-

proval that would help cattle-cloning companies sell their services to cattle breeders. The new technology will likely be used to clone top-ranked bulls and cows so that their semen and eggs can be mass-produced and combined to birth even-more-productive cattle.

Animal-cloning opponents, including Carol Tucker Foreman, the head of the Consumer Federation of America's Food Policy Institute, won backing from some Democratic lawmakers, including Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut. But those supporters failed to block the FDA's approval of animal cloning, although they managed to get favorable language inserted into the Senate's version of the farm bill.

The coalition opposing the technology is composed of the CFA, Consumers Union, and a variety of groups that urge better treatment of animals, such as the American Anti-Vivisection Society, Farm Sanctuary, and the Humane Society of the United States.

But this alliance is somewhat divided. The consumer groups try to focus their argument on science, contending that the food is not scientifically proven to be safe. That's the approach taken by Consumers Union's Hansen, who plays down the ethical arguments about cloning. "What's behind that culturally, I'm not sure," he said. The animal-welfare groups say that cloning is cruel because it yields spontaneous abortions and deformed animals that can injure the females used to gestate the clones.

The International Dairy Foods Association has allied with the coalition because it fears that the controversy over cloned milk will curdle consumers' appetite for milk products.

Several of the coalition's advocates said they would push for additional safety investigations and press for rules that would

allow meat and milk producers, as well as grocery stores, to label products as coming from uncloned cattle in hopes of spurring sales, as has happened with "organic" labeling. Legislation introduced by Mikulski and DeLauro would require the FDA to allow labeling of meat from uncloned animals.

Biotech executives oppose labeling as a costly step that would stigmatize their products in domestic and overseas markets. In the 1990s, skittish European consumers and environmental groups hurt sales of food made with U.S.-designed genetically modified crops.

Meanwhile, the biotech industry has made progress on complex, human-cloning technology. On January 17, a California-based company, Stemagen, announced it had cloned two human embryos to obtain stem cells for use in research. The achievement is inconclusive, in part, because the company did not demonstrate that the resulting embryos were healthy enough for commercial use. The drug industry says that tailored stem cells, perhaps from cloned embryos, would accelerate, and reduce the cost of, testing of potential drugs.

In 2001, social-conservative groups persuaded President Bush to curb federal spending on research that uses embryonic stem cells. But those organizations, including the Family Research Council, the National Right to Life Committee, and Catholic and Baptist groups, failed to get the administration or Congress to curb or ban commercial human-cloning research, such as that conducted by Stemagen.

The partisan divide over cloning is illustrated by Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., vice chairwoman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. On January 15, she issued a press release calling for hearings on the safety of food made from cloned animals, and on January 17, she endorsed Stemagen's cloning success.

The hearing on animal cloning is needed, DeGette told *National Journal*, because of clashing scientific opinions on the safety of food from cloned animals.

Government should also support "ethical SCNT" because it will lead to better medical technology, DeGette said. SCNT, or somatic cell nuclear transfer, is the scientific label for one cloning technique. The Stemagen advance was a successful demonstration of SCNT, said DeGette, who is a prominent advocate for abortion

rights. It was not human cloning because it did not result in birth, she said, and "if I get my way, nobody will ever do that, because we'll ban it."

Opponents of animal cloning welcomed DeGette's call for a hearing. "We were delighted to read her press release, and we think it is a good idea," Foreman said.

She also echoed DeGette when she said that cloning animals for food is different from cloning human embryos for use in medical research. The use of cloned human embryos offers potential medical benefits that offset the "concerns about human cloning," but animal cloning offers little benefit and some risk, said Foreman, who supports abortion rights.

Yet Foreman urged opponents of human cloning to ally with her group and others that are fighting animal cloning. "The technology used in cloning animals is the same technology, and is perfecting the same technology, that could be used to clone humans," she said.

Since about 2000, several advocates have tried to bridge the divide between the factions. They include Jaydee Hanson, director for Human Genetics Policy at the International Center for Technology Assessment; Nigel Cameron, director of the Institute on Biotechnology and the Human Future; and Richard Hayes, executive director of the Center for Genetics and Society. "As people begin to understand what's really at stake, I'm confident that both liberals and conservatives will be able to agree, even as they continue to disagree about abortion," Hayes said.

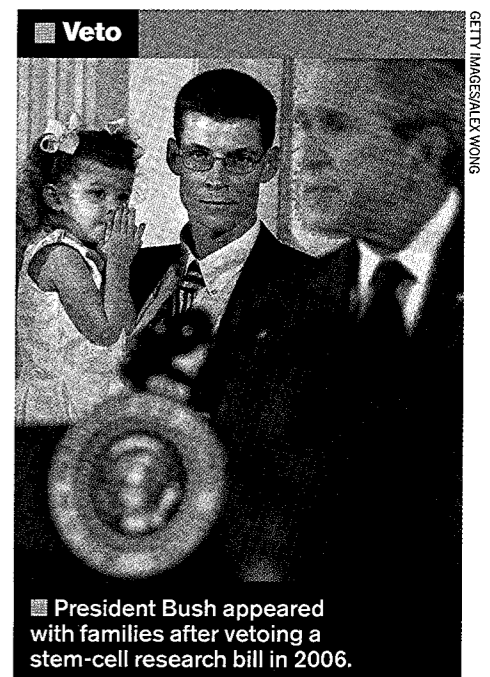
For the moment, the conservative groups are not going along. "Our folks have kept [the animal-cloning issue] at arm's length because, in theory, they're not averse to animal cloning," the Family Research Council's Prentice said. "It is not a human-life issue, even though there is the slippery slope." Instead, Prentice and his allies are promoting emerging alternative sources of stem cells. Possibilities include stem cells found in adults and new techniques announced in November that induce ordinary skin cells to change into stem cells similar to those in embryos.

But even if the alternative sources prove useful for research, social conservatives will face a new problem—the use of stem cells to accelerate the development of genetic-engineering technologies,

Prentice said. Eventually, such technologies could be bought by the wealthy to genetically modify themselves and their children to gain a biological advantage, he said.

That's where Prentice sees a potential alliance with liberal groups that oppose genetic engineering that changes a person's sperm or eggs. "That's the [issue] most of the people I've known have focused on," he said, because it would impose one generation's choices on the next.

Foreman and Hanson agreed that it is a likely meeting point for groups on the left and right. "The genetic engineering of animals has the potential to develop the technology for the genetic engineering of humans," Foreman said.



Hayes said, "If we can put the embryo and abortion questions aside, there is a possibility of a broad consensus that would unite both liberals and conservatives [against] human genetic manipulation."

But their effort to create a coalition will continue to face pressure from the biotech industry and from abortion-rights advocates, who have repeatedly used the abortion card to win liberal votes in the debates over embryonic stem cells. SCNT and animal cloning "are not even the same thing," said DeGette, who also serves as a chief deputy whip. "It is in the political interest of the Religious Right to confuse these two issues."

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