

European biotechnology

Parliament giving up alcohol

THE giant Italian food and agricultural company Ferruzzi is set to fight back after the European Parliament struck a blow against its plans to convert Europe's grain mountain into fuel alcohol. The plan, according to Ferruzzi, would create jobs, be environmentally benign, and give farmers a new deal. But, says a report adopted by parliament before the summer recess, the project would kill jobs in the oil industry and could produce far more pollution (in the form of biological oxygen demand) than all Europe's sewage. In Brazil, where a similar project has been under way since the 1970s, up to half a million jobs have been created, 80 per cent of them unskilled, says the report. There are no studies available, however, to indicate the possible impact in Europe, where educational and skill levels are higher and where technology is often cheaper than labour.

Ferruzzi, the company whose proposal led to the reports, was recently referred to the British Monopolies Commission for its thinly disguised attempt to take over British Sugar, the UK beet monopoly. But this has been only the latest event in the saga of the expansionist group, which already controls most of the sugar production in Italy and has a controlling stake in the leading French sugar manufacturer Beghin-Say. Control of British Sugar would give Ferruzzi one quarter of the sugar market of the whole European Economic Community (EEC). Through its alcohol project, the company has shown an almost equal interest in grain.

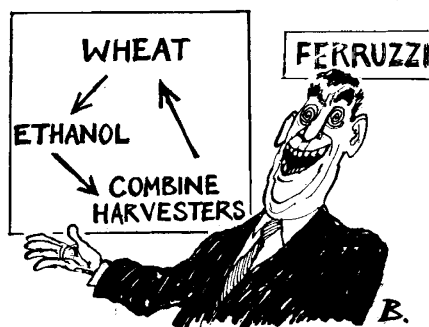
Ferruzzi's grain-to-alcohol plans would leave Scotch whisky producers standing. The group has proposed 12 conversion plants, costing upwards of \$560 million, and designed to take 15 million tonnes of cereals a year for conversion to alcohol.

The Ferruzzi plants would be built in France, where 94 per cent of Europe's grain surplus is grown (according to the European Parliament report). Naturally enough, the French farm minister François Guillaume, an ex-farming trade unionist, supports the Ferruzzi plan, and so do most of the French members of the European Parliament, but this was not enough last month to reject the parliamentary report, which itself rejected the production of bioethanol from raw materials "in present market conditions". The resistance to a large, precipitous bioethanol programme cut across all countries (other than France) and all parties; and although the parliament has little real power, its position will certainly give political weight to the European Commission (the EEC secretariat) which has also rejected the Ferruzzi proposal.

The principal reason for rejection is that the project is drastically uneconomic with-

out vast EEC subsidies. Ferruzzi's plans would require grain at world market prices. The present EEC subsidy to grain farmers, guaranteeing the sale of their grain at inflated European prices, would therefore have to continue. Moreover, this would still not bring the alcohol down to saleable prices as a fuel additive, where it could displace either petrol itself or the

In other words, perpetual motion!



new lead-free anti-knock agents. At present prices of oil and of anti-knock agents, governments would also have to offer tax reductions on any alcohol-containing petrol sold, the Ferruzzi group says.

Such arguments would seem to rule the whole proposal out of hand — and certainly the canny Dutch ex-economics minister, Fran Adriessen, who is now European Commissioner for Agriculture, rejects it — if it were not for the renowned strength of certain European agricultural lobbies, particularly the French. Ferruzzi's president, Dr Paul Gardini, has promised that he will not let the issue rest. The possible carcinogenicity of some proposed

anti-knock agents is one new line to try.

Meanwhile, therefore, the vote at the European Parliament is just one further move in the game, which is continuing through a \$200,000 study on the social and economic impacts of a European gasohol programme. This independent report should be ready in draft by November, when it could in principle receive attention by the Commission during the British presidency of the European Council, the Commission's decision-making body. But Britain, committed to reforming the over-productive and costly Common Agricultural Policy is thought to see European gasohol as yet another "black hole" of European subsidy, and will not aid the Ferruzzi project even if the study recommends it.

The European Parliament did not reject the development of bioethanol plants on a smaller scale, and at smaller rates of subsidy, than envisaged by Ferruzzi, however. Small plants could be of use to remote rural areas and parliament recommended Commission support for research and pilot projects along these lines. On the whole, however, the European Parliament, which has a higher representation of scientists than probably any national assembly in Europe, is of the opinion that the Ferruzzi plan would do damage to the more cautious and reasonable plans of the Commission to introduce biotechnology to European farms under its proposals for "stimulating agro-industrial development". These, involving pilot studies from post-research field trials of new crops to biotechnology-based processes, are not billed to remove the European food surpluses next year, but could, Commission officials hope, sow the seeds of a new European agriculture. A failed bioethanol programme could set such proposals back by years.

Robert Walgate

Transplant donor held up by red tape

WHEN Dr Robert Gale, the bone-marrow transplant specialist, flew to Moscow in May to treat the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, he took with him an essential piece of equipment for sorting cells, developed at Israel's Weizmann Institute. He also took an urgent request for help from an Israeli biologist, Michael Sherman, who himself needs a bone marrow transplant. Ironically, until he developed leukaemia last year, Sherman was employed at *Inter-yeda*, a commercial company established to develop innovations based on research conducted at the Weizmann Institute.

Michael Sherman is an emigrant from the Soviet Union, who settled in Israel some six years ago. The only possible related donor would be his sister, who still lives in Moscow. In February, as soon as she heard of her brother's illness, she immediately applied to OVIR, the Soviet

passport department, for permission to go to Israel to donate the necessary marrow. There was no immediate reply, but after Gale's visit, the sister and her husband and children were called to the OVIR office. They were informed that a temporary visit to Israel on a Soviet passport was impossible due to "bureaucratic difficulties", and were advised to apply for permanent emigration to Israel. On 2 July, therefore, they filed the appropriate papers.

Shortly afterwards, Sherman says, "unpleasant things" began to happen. His sister was demoted to a lower-paid job, and, now "they are examining the possibility of firing her". It now appears, he says, that OVIR is treating the case as a routine request to emigrate, with all the delays that involves. And that, in Sherman's case, could well be too late.

Vera Rich