

Will overregulation in Europe stymie synthetic biology?

The promising new field of “synthetic biology” involves the design and construction of new biological components, devices and systems, as well as the re-design of existing, natural biological systems. It is intended to move microbiology and cell biology closer to the approach of engineering so that standardized biological parts can be mixed, matched and assembled similar to the way that off-the-shelf chassis, engines, transmissions and so on can be combined to build a hot-rod.

Building on the foundations of molecular biology, biological chemistry, gene sequencing informatics, systems biology and systems engineering, synthetic biology is not fundamentally new but involves the synergistic combination of many areas of science and technology. It could offer scientists unprecedented opportunities for innovation and better enable them to craft made-to-order microorganisms and plants with improved abilities of many kinds — for example, to produce vaccines, clean up toxic wastes, and obtain (or “fix”) nitrogen from the air (obviating the need for chemical fertilizers).

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