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Global Citizens Declaration calls for precaution on synthetic biology

Sydney Australia & Washington DC USA — Today a broad coalition of 111 organisations world-wide releases *The Principles for the Oversight of Synthetic Biology*. This is the first global civil society statement of principles necessary to govern synthetic organisms and their products, to protect public health and the environment, and to meet economic, social and ethical goals. The coalition calls for a moratorium on any release or commercial use of artificially created organisms until these principles are implemented.

Synthetic biology is “extreme genetic engineering” — not only cutting and pasting genes but also writing genetic code to create new genes, genetic traits and new life forms from scratch. Industry and governments are pouring billions into the creation of new living things and the market for synbio products may be \$10.8 billion by 2016. Despite this, governments have failed to legislate, assess or eliminate the novel risks from synthetic organisms that have never existed before.

The diverse coalition includes environmental, religious, consumer, scientific, worker and human rights groups all calling for the strong governance of synthetic biology, that puts human and environmental health before corporate profits.

The global coalition calls for seven principles to help safeguard public health and the environment, including open, genuine and full public participation in all synbio decisions:

- *Apply the Precautionary Principle*
- *Require mandatory synthetic biology-specific regulations*
- *Protect public health and worker safety*
- *Protect the environment, including biodiversity*
- *Guarantee the right-to-know and democratic participation*
- *Require corporate accountability and manufacturer liability*
- *Protect economic and environmental justice*

“These Principles are an important milestone, as a diverse, global coalition of civil society groups calls for all aspects of synthetic biology to be strongly regulated in ways that protect the public interest,” says Bob Phelps, Director of Gene Ethics.

“Self-regulation of the synthetic biology industry would be too dangerous and the present laws on Genetic Manipulation (GM) are outdated and inept. For instance, our regulators use the concept of ‘substantial equivalence’ to compare the safety of GM and ordinary foods. But synthetic organisms never existed and have no history of safe use, so cannot be compared. If released, synthetic organisms will also evolve into ‘who knows what?’

“Our Principles document asks governments from the international to local level to all enact laws and play their part to protect us from the hazards of new synthetic organisms. For instance, they should all sign and ratify the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on

Biological Diversity (CBD) which aims to safely regulate the international transfer, handling and use of Living Modified Organisms. Australia and Canada have not signed while the USA is not even a signatory to the CBD.

“Synbio is also set to deepen social and economic inequalities and injustices. Synthetic micro-organisms designed to make fuels, chemicals, plastics and other industrial materials will be fed on biomass that now feeds, clothes and houses people, many in less industrialised countries. The gap between rich and poor is set to get worse, not better.

“We call for a global ban on the release and commercial use of all synthetic organisms until a public interest research and public policy agenda is set to examine all the options for meeting every-one’s needs – fairly and equitably.

“We also call for the ban on synthetic organisms until stringent laws and regulations are enacted to ensure biosafety. We humans living now have an obligation to safeguard future generations and to be wise in our development and use of new technologies that may threaten life on Earth,” Mr Phelps concludes.

The full Principles report will soon be available online at:
<http://www.foe.org/principles-for-synthetic-biology>

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