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The Public Looks at Synthetic Biology—Cautiously

National survey finds support for research but with oversight and greater attention to risks

WASHINGTON, DC: Synthetic biology—defined as the design and construction of new biological parts, devices, and systems or re-design of existing natural biological systems for useful purposes—holds enormous potential to improve everything from energy production to medicine, with the global market projected to reach \$4.5 billion by 2015. But what does the public know about this emerging field, and what are their hopes and concerns? A new poll of 1,000 U.S. adults conducted by Hart Research Associates and the Synthetic Biology Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center finds that two-thirds of Americans think that synthetic biology should move forward, but with more research to study its possible effects on humans and the environment, while one-third support a ban until we better understand its implications and risks. More than half of Americans believe the federal government should be involved in regulating synthetic biology.

“The survey clearly shows that much more attention needs to be paid to addressing biosafety and biosecurity risks,” said David Rejeski, Director of the Synthetic Biology Project. “In addition, government and industry need to engage the public about the science and its applications, benefits, and risks.”

The poll findings reveal that the proportion of adults who say they have heard a lot or some about synthetic biology has almost tripled in three years, (from 9 percent to 26 percent). By comparison, self-reported awareness of nanotechnology increased from 24 percent to 34 percent during the same three-year period.

Although the public supports continued research in the area of synthetic biology, it also harbors concerns, including 27 percent who have security concerns (concerns that the science will be used to make harmful things), 25 percent who have moral concerns, and a similar proportion who worry about negative health consequences for humans. A smaller portion, 13 percent, worries about possible damage to the environment.

“The survey shows that attitudes about synthetic biology are not clear-cut and that its application is an important factor in shaping public attitudes towards it,” said Geoff Garin, President of Hart Research. Six in 10 respondents support the use of synthetic biology to produce a flu vaccine. In contrast, three-fourths of those surveyed have concerns about its use to accelerate the growth of livestock to increase food production. Among those for whom moral issues are the top concern, the majority views both applications in a negative light.

The findings come from a nationwide telephone survey of 1,000 adults and has a margin of error of ± 3.1 percentage points. This is the fifth year that Hart Research Associates has conducted a survey to gauge public opinion about nanotechnology and/or synthetic biology for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The report can be found at: www.synbioproject.org

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