

Press Release

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Synthetic Biology Remains a Mystery

National survey finds three out of four adults have heard little or nothing about the emerging technology

Washington— Despite advancements in the field of synthetic biology, three out of four adults surveyed in a national poll released today have heard “just a little” or “nothing at all” about the emerging technology, a level of awareness that has changed little since 2010.

The national poll of more than 800 U.S. adults conducted by Hart Research Associates and the Synthetic Biology Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars finds that there has only been a minor shift in public awareness of synthetic biology, an area of research focused on the design and construction of new biological parts and devices, or re-design of existing biological systems.

“Given these low levels of awareness about synthetic biology, attitudes about the technology are still largely unformed,” said David Rejeski, director of the Synthetic Biology Project. “The information people receive about the science and its applications will be critical to how the public feels about this technology going forward.”

As the public learns more about synthetic biology, there is greater movement toward concern about risk than optimism about benefits, the poll finds. After hearing some basic information about synthetic biology, 33 percent of adults express greater concern about risks from the technology, while 24 percent express more optimism about its benefits.

“This survey reveals the American public’s nuanced and varied impressions of synthetic biology depending on the information provided and the application in question,” said Abigail Davenport, a partner with Hart Research. “While the majority would like to see the science proceed, there are several findings that highlight the public’s call for caution in moving ahead.”

The public has divided opinions on the future of synthetic biology and the role of government regulation. While 61 percent think the science should move forward, one-third of respondents favor a ban “on synthetic biology research until we better understand its implications and risks.”

Despite a low level of confidence in the federal government to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of synthetic biology and less support for federal government

regulation of synthetic biology than seen previously, the public is still divided in its support for voluntary guidelines developed by both industry and government (43 percent) compared with support for federal regulation (45 percent).

The poll also finds very little shift in the public's awareness of nanotechnology when compared with earlier polls conducted by the Wilson Center and Hart Research. According to the poll, 31 percent of adults have "heard a lot" or "heard some" about nanotechnology.

The findings come from a nationwide telephone survey conducted in January 2013 of 804 adults, including 243 who only use a cell phone. The poll has a margin of error of ± 3.5 percentage points. This is the sixth time since 2006 that Hart Research has conducted a survey to gauge public opinion about emerging technologies for the Wilson Center.

A full report on the poll findings can be downloaded here:

http://www.synbioproject.org/process/assets/files/6653/_draft/synbiosurvey2013.pdf

For a detailed discussion of the results, please join us at the official release event on **March 20 at noon** at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC. A live webcast is also available. For details, please visit: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/awareness-and-impressions-synthetic-biology-results-the-2013-poll>

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About the Synthetic Biology Project

The Synthetic Biology Project is an initiative of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The Project aims to foster informed public and policy discourse concerning the advancement of synthetic biology. For more information, visit: <http://www.synbioproject.org>

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