

FLORIDA POLITICIANS URGE USE OF INTREXON GM MOSQUITOES FOR ZIKA

MIAMI: Intrexon Corp said on Wednesday a bipartisan coalition of Florida politicians had urged the US government to step up efforts to fight Zika, including sanctioning the emergency use of the company's genetically engineered mosquitoes. The Florida House members, led by Speaker-designate Richard Corcoran and Democratic leader-designate Janet Cruz, have written to the US Department of Health and Human Services, and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), seeking permission for the state and local governments to use the GM mosquito, the company said.

FDA said in an email to Reuters that it had received the letter and will respond directly to the Florida coalition, without specifying a timeframe for it.

No vaccine or treatment has been approved for Zika. The virus, first detected in Brazil last year, has rapidly spread across the Americas and parts of Asia. In recent weeks, US authorities determined that local mosquitoes were transmitting Zika in an area of south Florida. The US territory of Puerto Rico has also experienced a widespread outbreak.

US health regulators cleared the way last month for a trial in Key Haven, Florida to assess the effectiveness of Intrexon's GM mosquitoes to reduce levels of the aedes aegypti mosquito population, which is known to carry Zika, dengue and chikungunya. There is vote scheduled in November seeking community approval for the trial, as the use of Intrexon's mosquitoes have raised concerns among the locals about its safety. In the letter, the politicians said that delaying Florida's access to Intrexon's technology posed "an unnecessary health risk" to the people of Florida, the company said. The mosquitoes are genetically altered so their offspring die before they can reproduce. Trials in Brazil, Panama and the Cayman Islands have shown that the GM mosquitoes can reduce localized Aedes aegypti populations by more than 90 percent. The GM mosquito strain is made by Oxitec, an Oxford University spin-off company that is now a UK subsidiary of US-based Intrexon. — Reuters

SINGAPORE UNCLEAR IF ZIKA STRAIN CAUSES BIRTH DEFECTS

LOCAL ZIKA STRAIN IN SINGAPORE DIFFERENT THAN BRAZIL'S

SINGAPORE: Singapore said yesterday it did not know if the Zika virus detected in the country could cause the same birth defects and other disorders linked to an outbreak in Latin America.

A DNA analysis of the mosquito-borne virus, which has infected almost 300 people in Singapore, including two pregnant women, revealed slight differences between the strains but it was not clear what that meant in terms of the severity of

the disease, the health ministry said. The World Health Organisation (WHO), which has declared Zika an international health emergency, says more research is needed to determine the effects of the different Zika strains.

"There is no evidence from existing studies and from this sequence to indicate whether the differences between these strains and the South American virus correlate with differences in severity or type of disease," the health ministry said. "Correlation

of virus strains with specific clinical manifestations will take long-term careful epidemiological studies as well as experimental studies," it added.

The WHO has said that infection with the virus in pregnant women can cause the birth defect microcephaly, in which the brain and head of the baby are undersized, and other severe brain abnormalities. The WHO also said it was likely that the Zika virus could trigger the Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare neurological disorder that can result in paralysis, though conclusive proof may take years. The connection between the virus and microcephaly first came to light in Brazil, which has been the hardest hit by the outbreak affecting Latin America. Scientists say the Zika strain in Brazil most likely evolved from an Asian strain. The virus, first detected in Uganda in 1947, spread to equatorial Asia in the 1960s and 1980s.

Singapore said the strain causing the current outbreak also evolved from an Asian strain. Raymond Lin, head of the National Public Health Laboratory said the strain in Singapore and Brazil were slightly different, but it was not clear what this meant. "There might be fine differences, there might be more mutations but currently there is no evidence at all to suggest that it's less severe or more severe; whether there is less or more likelihood of getting microcephaly," he told media. —Reuters



SEPANG: An oil palm plantation worker carrying an oil palm bunch to be loaded onto the back of a truck at a plantation near Sepang. A Malaysian delegation is in Paris during this week to defend the virtues of the controversial palm oil, and try to get the abandonment of the French tax proposal on palm oil, the Malaysian Minister of Plantation presents as "sustainable" and "good for health". —AFP

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Dr. Fahad Al-Mukhaizeem
 فهد علي المخيزيم

Consultant Pediatrician استشاري أطفال
 M.B. Bch. FRCPC. FAAFP. PEM



Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St. 1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B - Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368