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### **Opinion Piece on Victorian Strategic Development Plan**

Yesterday's release of the State Government's Biotechnology Strategic Review is a welcome reminder just how far Victorian biotechnology has come in six years – and also how far any sector can come when solidly backed by its State Government.

In just six years the Victorian Government has committed a massive \$2 billion to investment in science, technology and innovation. This commitment has generated significant returns - in 2006-2007, Victorian companies raised \$387 million or 43% of the total \$902 million raised by Australian life science firms. Impressive figures and evidence of genuine commitment.

In this Review, the emphasis has shifted to a broader definition of biotechnology, a recognition that biotech crosses more than the medical and agricultural fields. The Review makes it clear that Premier Brumby (always a great champion of Victorian biotechnology as Innovation Minister) sees the sector as crossing, and influencing, everything from ecology to climate change, alternative fuels to new medical devices. Essentially Victorian biotechnology is no longer a sector on its own converting some of our major research breakthroughs into therapies – it is a sector that has the potential to provide solutions to most of our manmade problems.

However there are some omissions in the Review, some areas that have been ignored by the Victorian Government and, which if not addressed, will seriously impact on the State's long held belief that it can be a Top Five global biotechnology centre by 2010.

Firstly, it is imperative that Victoria does not forget about Asia. Victoria, like the rest of Australia when it comes to biotech, must stop looking only at the old markets and embrace the new ones as well if it truly wants to become an international presence.

Victoria, and the companies within it, must think before taking the 30 hour flights to US and Europe and recognise that there is a viable – and very lucrative market – on its doorstep, in India, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, China and Singapore. Victoria has the chance to not only develop strong partnerships with Asian companies and Governments it has the added ability to become a conduit for US and European countries wanting to enter into the Asian markets themselves.

A lesser criticism of the Review is that it talks the talk about partnerships to deal with the perennial issues of infrastructure; skills; bioeconomy and regulation, but it fails to provide the detail to just how these areas can be improved. As a national body we will assist the Government in determining ways to improve the national regulatory and bioeconomy environments to make them conducive to small and large biotech companies as well as the research base that provides the building blocks for any commercial venture.

The problem is that - while this is a worthwhile goal consultation takes time and participation on committees takes time –time is one thing that the CEOs and CSOs of small to medium sized biotech companies simply don't have. As an organisation that represents more than 2500 biotech entities, AusBiotech will assist by working with industry and government to develop the required detail in how the sector will be engaged on State and National issues that impact on Victorian companies in areas such as infrastructure, capital access and regulation.

Next week, AusBiotech hosts its Annual Conference in Brisbane. Called Smart Targeting into Global Markets, the conference will attract more than 1200 delegates and some of the most senior players in companies such as Bristol Myers Squibb, Merck Sharpe and Dohme along with 10 other large Pharma companies. The fact that Australia is ready to host such a conference (and Victoria will host the 2008 annual AusBiotech meeting) – that companies here have reached a stage of maturity whereby they can play more confidently in the global sphere – is in no small part due to the commitment over the past six years shown by the Victorian government to the sector.

What is needed now is greater consultation with Victoria's biotech industry, all of it. And the State needs to look East as well as West in order to become a Top Five biotech destination by 2010. Combined with the commitment and the progress that has been made since 2001, there is no reason why such as goal should not be achieved.

***Dr Anna Lavelle is CEO of AusBiotech, Australia's Biotechnology Industry Organisation, which represents 2,500 members, covering the human health, agricultural, medical device, environmental and industrial sectors in biotechnology. The AusBiotech 2007 Conference runs from October 21 to 24. [www.ausbiotech.org](http://www.ausbiotech.org)***

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