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Improved alphavirus replicons and helper constructs

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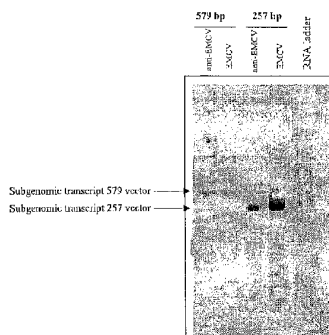
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(54) Title: IMPROVED ALPHAVIRUS REPLICONS AND HELPER CONSTRUCTS



Northern analysis of spacer IRES replicon subgenomic RNAs

(57) Abstract: The present invention provides a recombinant nucleic acid comprising: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein; at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter; at least one IRES element; at least one heterologous nucleic acid; and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence. Further provided are methods of making alphavirus particles comprising a recombinant nucleic acid of this invention and methods of using the compositions of this invention. Also provided is a recombinant helper nucleic acid comprising: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; an alphavirus subgenomic promoter; an IRES element; a second nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein; and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

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Conversely, specific shut-off of cap-dependent initiation depends upon modification of eIF4F functionality (Thompson & Sarnow. *Current Opinion in Microbiology* 3:366–370 (2000)).

IRES elements bypass cap-dependent translation inhibition; thus the translation
5 directed by an IRES element is termed “cap-independent.” IRES-driven translation
initiation prevails during many viral infections, such as, for example, picornaviral
infection (Macejak & Sarnow. *Nature* 353:90–94 (1991)). Under these circumstances,
cap-dependent initiation is inhibited or severely compromised due to the presence of
small amounts of functional eIF4F. This is caused by cleavage or loss of solubility of
10 eIF4G (Gradi et al. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA* 95:11089–
11094 (1998)); 4E-BP dephosphorylation (Gingras et al. *Proceedings of the National
Academy of Sciences, USA* 93:5578–5583 (1996)) or poly(A)-binding protein (PABP)
cleavage (Joachims et al. *Journal of Virology* 73:718–727 (1999)).

Alphavirus vectors that express a nucleic acid of interest (NOI) at varying levels
15 have been described. All of these examples describe modification of the alphavirus
non-structural protein genes or of the 26S (subgenomic) promoter to regulate vector
replication or transcription from the subgenomic promoter. Examples include
mutations in the non-structural protein genes that increase or decrease subgenomic
RNA transcription or alter genomic RNA replication, resulting in modified NOI
20 expression. Control of protein expression from an alphavirus vector, at the level of
translation of the subgenomic mRNA, has not been described previously.

Disclosed herein are alphavirus replicon and helper vectors engineered to
control the expression of one or more heterologous nucleic acid sequences at the level
of protein translation via a cap-independent mechanism under the direction of an IRES
25 element.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A first aspect provides a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising:
30 (a) a nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition
sequence;

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- (b) a nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein;
- (c) an alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES- heterologous nucleic acid of interest (NOI) cassette, which is in 5' to 3' orientation; and
- (d) a nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

5

In one embodiment, the alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette may comprise a spacer non-coding nucleic acid sequence located 3' to the alphavirus subgenomic promoter and 5' to the IRES.

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A second aspect provides a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising:

- (a) a nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;
- (b) a nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein;
- (c) a first alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation;
- (d) a second alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation; and
- (e) a nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

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A third aspect provides a population of infectious, defective, alphavirus particles, wherein at least one particle comprises the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of the first or second aspect.

25

A fourth aspect provides a pharmaceutical composition comprising the population of the third aspect in a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

A fifth aspect provides an alphavirus particle comprising a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to the first or second aspect.

30

A sixth aspect provides a recombinant helper nucleic acid comprising:

- (a) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;

- (b) an alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation, wherein the NOI encodes one or more alphavirus structural proteins; and
- (c) a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

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A seventh aspect provides a cell comprising the recombinant helper nucleic acid of the eighth aspect and/or the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of the first or second aspect.

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An eighth aspect provides a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- a) introducing into a cell the following:
- (i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to the first or second aspect; and
 - (ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins, wherein the one or more helper nucleic acids produce all of the alphavirus structural proteins; and
- b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

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A ninth aspect provides a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- a) introducing into a cell the following:
- i) an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, nucleic acid sequence(s) encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a heterologous nucleic acid sequence and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; and
 - ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a recombinant nucleic acid according to the sixth aspect, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and
- b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

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A tenth aspect provides a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- a) introducing into a cell the following:
 - i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to the first or second aspect; and
 - ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a recombinant nucleic acid according to the sixth aspect, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and
- b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

An eleventh aspect provides an infectious defective alphavirus particle produced by the method of any one of the eighth to tenth aspects.

A twelfth aspect provides a method of eliciting an immune response in a subject, comprising administering to the subject an immunogenic amount of the population of the third aspect, the composition of the fourth aspect or the particle of the fifth or eleventh aspect.

A thirteenth aspect provides use of an immunogenic amount of the population of the third aspect, the composition of the fourth aspect or the particle of the fifth or eleventh aspect in the manufacture of a medicament for eliciting an immune response in a subject.

Disclosed herein is a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, at least one heterologous nucleic acid, and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, and an alphavirus packaging signal which allows the replicon to be packaged into particles.

Also disclosed is a recombinant helper nucleic acid comprising: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding one or more than one alphavirus structural protein, and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

Also disclosed herein is an alphavirus particle comprising an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention. In a further embodiment, provided herein is a population of infectious, defective, alphavirus particles, wherein each particle contains an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention. Disclosed herein is a population of infectious, defective alphavirus particles wherein each particle contains an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention, and the population has no detectable replication-competent virus, as measured by passage on cell culture. In specific embodiments, the particles of this invention can contain one or more attenuating mutations.

In addition, pharmaceutical compositions are disclosed, which may comprise the particles and populations of this invention in a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

Disclosed herein is a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising: (a) introducing into a population of cells (i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention; and (ii) one or more helper nucleic acid(s) encoding alphavirus structural proteins; wherein all of the alphavirus structural proteins are provided in the cells; and (b) producing said alphavirus particles in the population of cells. The method of this invention can further comprise the step of collecting said alphavirus particles from the cells.

In some embodiments, the helper nucleic acid of this invention can also be a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention. For example, a recombinant nucleic acid of this invention can comprise, as a heterologous nucleic acid and/or in addition to a heterologous nucleic acid, a nucleic acid sequence encoding one alphavirus structural protein or more than one alphavirus structural protein. In such

embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid is considered to be a recombinant replicon helper nucleic acid, which can be present in a cell with other helper nucleic acids and/or other recombinant nucleic acids of this invention.

5 Thus, in a specific embodiment, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention further encodes an alphavirus structural protein or more than one alphavirus structural protein. This recombinant replicon nucleic acid can be introduced into a population of cells together with one or more helper nucleic acids, such that the recombinant replicon nucleic acid and the helper nucleic acid(s) produce all of the
10 alphavirus structural proteins, and the recombinant replicon nucleic acid is packaged into particles in said cells.

 Additionally disclosed are methods of eliciting an immune response in a subject, comprising administering to the subject an immunogenic amount of the nucleic acids,
15 vectors, particles populations and/or compositions of this invention.

 Also disclosed is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising: a promoter that directs transcription of a nucleic acid; an IRES element; and a nucleic acid comprising a coding sequence, wherein the IRES element is operably located such that translation of the
20 coding sequence is via a cap-independent mechanism directed by the IRES element and not via a cap-dependent mechanism.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

25 Figure 1 shows a northern blot of spacer-IRES replicon subgenomic RNAs.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

 As used herein, "a," "an" and "the" can mean one or more than one, depending
30 on the context in which it is used. As examples, "a cell" can mean one cell or multiple cells; and "a heterologous nucleic acid" can mean one heterologous nucleic acid or multiple heterologous nucleic acids.

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In the claims which follow and in the description of the invention, except where the context requires otherwise due to express language or necessary implication, the word "comprise" or variations such as "comprises" or "comprising" is used in an inclusive sense, i.e. to specify the presence of the stated features but not to preclude the presence or addition of further features in various embodiments of the invention.

The present invention is based on the surprising and unexpected discovery that transcription of a nucleic acid and translation of the nucleic acid can be uncoupled. Thus, disclosed herein is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising: a promoter that directs transcription; an IRES element; and a coding sequence, wherein the IRES element is operably located such that translation of the coding sequence is via a cap-independent mechanism directed by the IRES element and not via a cap-dependent mechanism. For the purposes of this invention, the term "transcription" includes the production of RNA from an alphavirus subgenomic promoter of a recombinant replicon nucleic acid, which can itself be an RNA molecule. That is, the subgenomic promoter on a recombinant replicon RNA molecule of this invention can direct the transcription of a messenger RNA encoding a heterologous NOI. Separately, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid can be "replicated," i.e., copied from the 5' replication recognition sequence through to the replication recognition sequence.

Also disclosed is a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, at least one heterologous nucleic acid, and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence. In certain embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid further comprises an alphavirus packaging signal so that the replicon can be packaged into particles. In further embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid can comprise a spacer nucleic acid sequence that can be located upstream of an IRES element.

It is understood that in various embodiments, the elements of the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention can be present in the order listed herein and/or

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present in any order. Thus for example, disclosed herein is a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising, in the following order: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, at least one heterologous nucleic acid, and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence

As used herein, a "5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence" and "3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence" are 5' and 3' sequences (the 5' and 3' designations referring to their location in the alphavirus nucleic acid), which control replication of an alphavirus genome. In certain embodiments, either or both the 5' and 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequences can be truncated at either end, provided that their function in replication of an alphavirus genome remains intact.

Also as used herein, "at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein" includes a nucleic acid sequence that encodes at least one, and possibly more than one, alphavirus nonstructural protein. For example, a second nucleic acid sequence of this invention can be a contiguous nucleotide sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp1, nsp2, nsp3 and nsp4, a contiguous nucleotide sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp1, nsp2 and nsp3, a contiguous nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp2, nsp3 and nsp4, a contiguous nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp1 and nsp2, a contiguous nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp3 and nsp4, a contiguous nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp2 and nsp3, a nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp1, a nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp2, a nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp3, a nucleic acid encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp4 and/or any combination and/or order thereof, such that the recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprises nucleotide sequences encoding nsp1, nsp2, nsp3 and nsp4 in total.

In particular embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention can comprise nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus nonstructural proteins in any combination and in any location relative to one another, such that the recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprises nucleotide sequences encoding nsp1, nsp2, nsp3 and nsp4 in total. For example, a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention can comprise, in the following order: a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, a second nucleic acid sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp1, nsp2 and nsp3, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, at least one heterologous nucleic acid, another second nucleic acid sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural protein nsp4, and a third nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence

As also used herein, an "alphavirus subgenomic promoter," "subgenomic promoter," or "26S promoter" is a promoter present in an alphavirus genome that directs transcription of a subgenomic message in a normal alphavirus replication process. The alphavirus subgenomic promoter can be truncated (e.g., to produce a minimal alphavirus subgenomic promoter) and/or modified such that its activity is reduced, maintained or increased, according to methods known in the art.

The recombinant nucleic acids of this invention can comprise an internal ribosome entry sequence (IRES) element, which directs translation of a nucleic acid into a protein via a cap-independent mechanism, as described herein and as is well known in the art. In particular in the recombinant replicon nucleic acids of the present invention, control of nucleic acid expression at the level of translation is accomplished by introducing an internal ribosome entry site (IRES) downstream of a alphavirus 26S subgenomic promoter and upstream of the coding sequence to be translated. The IRES element is positioned so that it directs translation of the mRNA, thereby minimizing, limiting or preventing initiation of translation of the mRNA from the methyl-7-guanosine (5')pppN structure present at the 5' end of the subgenomic mRNA (the "cap"). This "IRES-directed," cap-independent translation does not require or result in any significant modification of alphavirus non-structural protein genes that could alter replication and transcription.

Alphavirus vectors designed to control the expression level of a heterologous nucleic acid without modulating (e.g., disturbing, upsetting, perturbing, disrupting, increasing, enhancing, reducing, minimizing) genome replication or subgenomic transcription have several advantages over earlier vector designs. First, modulating genome replication can negatively affect VLP generation by limiting the number of genomic RNAs available for packaging into particles. Second, modulating subgenomic transcription by altering (e.g., by truncation, deletion, addition and/or substitution) the 26S promoter can alter genomic RNA replication, again resulting in limiting the number of genomic RNAs available for packaging into particles. Third, alphavirus replication induces a stress response in cells that can result in reduced cap-dependent translation of mRNAs. Switching from cap-dependent translation of an alphavirus subgenomic mRNA to the cap-independent mechanism provided by an IRES element minimizes this negative affect on NOI expression.

An IRES element of the present invention can include, but is not limited to, viral IRES elements from picornaviruses, e.g., poliovirus (PV) or the human enterovirus 71, e.g. strains 7423/MS/87 and BrCr thereof; from encephalomyocarditis virus (EMCV); from foot-and-mouth disease virus (FMDV); from flaviviruses, e.g., hepatitis C virus (HCV); from pestiviruses, e.g., classical swine fever virus (CSFV); from retroviruses, e.g., murine leukemia virus (MLV); from lentiviruses, e.g., simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV); from cellular mRNA IRES elements such as those from translation initiation factors, e.g., eIF4G or DAP5; from transcription factors, e.g., c-Myc (Yang and Sarnow, *Nucleic Acids Research* 25: 2800-2807 (1997)) or NF- κ B-repressing factor (NRF); from growth factors, e.g., vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), fibroblast growth factor (FGF-2) and platelet-derived growth factor B (PDGF B); from homeotic genes, e.g., *Antennapedia*; from survival proteins, e.g., X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis (XIAP) or Apaf-1; from chaperones, e.g., immunoglobulin heavy-chain binding protein BiP (Martinez-Salas et al., *Journal of General Virology* 82: 973-984, (2001)), from plant viruses, as well as any other IRES elements now known or later identified.

In certain embodiments, the IRES element of this invention can be derived from, for example, encephalomyocarditis virus (EMCV, GenBank accession # NC001479), cricket paralysis virus (GenBank accession # AF218039), *Drosophila* C

virus (GenBank accession # AF014388), *Plautia stali* intestine virus (GenBank accession # AB006531), *Rhopalosiphum padi* virus (GenBank accession # AF022937), Himetobi P virus (GenBank accession # AB017037), acute bec paralysis virus (GenBank accession # AF150629), Black queen cell virus (GenBank accession # AF183905), *Triatoma* virus (GenBank accession # AF178440), *Acyrtosiphon pisum* virus (GenBank accession # AF024514), infectious flacherie virus (GenBank accession # AB000906), and/or Sacbrood virus (Genbank accession # AF092924). In addition, disclosed herein is a synthetic IRES element, which can be designed, according to methods know in the art to mimic the function of naturally occurring IRES elements
10 (see Chappell et al. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A.* (2000) 97(4):1536-41.

In specific embodiments, the IRES element can be an insect IRES element or other non-mammalian IRES element that is functional in the particular helper cell line chosen for packaging of the recombinant alphavirus particles of this invention, but
15 would not be functional, or would be minimally functional, in a target host cell. Insect virus IRES elements have evolved to function optimally within insect cells and similarly mammalian-virus IRES sequences function optimally in mammalian cells. Thus, control of translation can be introduced into replicon vector systems by inserting insect virus-specific IRES elements into replicon RNAs. In this way, translation of
20 heterologous NOIs from replicon vectors can be regulated (attenuated) in mammalian cells and enhanced within insect cells. This is useful for those NOIs that are either toxic to the packaging cell or are detrimental to the alphavirus packaging process. An alternative way to achieve this effect is to use a mammalian IRES element in the replicon vector that is packaged in an insect cell culture system, thereby also avoiding
25 possibly significant translation of the heterologous NOI during packaging. Without being held to a particular hypothesis or theory, cellular factors and culture environment may play a role in IRES activity and function. Therefore, it is anticipated that additional levels of control/regulation of different IRES species within the same cell may be achieved through the supply/removal of certain cellular factors or by changes in
30 the culture environment (e.g., temperature) to preferentially direct translation to one IRES as compared to a second.

In some embodiments, the cellular environment of the helper or packaging cell line can be altered so that a specific activity of the IRES is either enhanced or reduced. Typically, IRES elements have evolved to function under conditions of cellular stress where increased levels of eIF-2alpha kinases result in reduced cap-dependent translation and a reciprocal increase in IRES-dependent translation/activity. Such conditions can be artificially induced in a cellular packaging system so as to increase expression from chosen IRES elements by a variety of methods including but not limited to hypoxia, hypothermia, nutritional/amino acid starvation, ER stress induction (e.g. using Thapsigargin), induction of interferon or PKR elements (e.g., using poly IC), blockage of tRNA dependent synthesis (e.g., using Edeine), or other general cell stressors known in the art, including but not limited to, hydrogen peroxide and sorbitol.

In other embodiments, IRES element-directed translation of the NOI can be modulated, e.g., through the use of anti-sense siRNAs specific for the IRES element/spacer or NOI which can be transfected into, or transduced/transiently expressed within the packaging cell by a number of standard methods known in the art and described herein.

As another alternative, the expression of the NOI can also be modulated by the use of ligand binding pairs, e.g., a nucleic acid element and a molecule (i.e. ligand) that binds to it (see, for example, U.S. Patent No. 6,242,259). Therefore, also disclosed is a recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising: a nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, one or more second nucleic acid sequence(s) encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, a non-alphavirus nucleotide sequence which, when bound by a ligand alters transcription of the subgenomic RNA and/or translation from the IRES, at least one heterologous nucleic acid, and a nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

As a specific embodiment, the ligand can be an RNA binding protein (e.g., R17 coat protein), an antisense sequence, a dye (e.g., Hoechst dyes H33258 or H33342), and/or an antibiotic (e.g. tobramycin or kanamycin). These can be

introduced into or produced in the packaging cells by methods known to those in the art (see U.S. Patent No. 6, 242, 259).

As utilized within the context of the present invention, a reduction of either
5 transcription of subgenomic RNA, or a reduction of translation of a NOI directed by
the IRES, due to the action of a ligand binding to a non-alphavirus nucleotide
sequence located in close proximity to the alphavirus subgenomic promoter or IRES
should be understood to refer to a statistically significant decrease of either
transcription or translation, respectively, in the presence of the selected ligand. In
10 some embodiments, the level of either transcription of subgenomic RNA or IRES-
directed NOI translation in cells is reduced at least 25%, 50%, 75%, or 90%, or 3-
fold, 5-fold, or 10-fold as compared to the levels without the presence of the binding
ligand. A wide variety of assays that are known in the art can be utilized to assess a
reduced level of transcription or translation, including for example, enzymatic assays
15 of a reporter gene, northern blots, metabolic RNA labeling and the like.

The recombinant replicon nucleic acids of this invention can comprise one or
more IRES elements and in those embodiments comprising two or more IRES
elements, the IRES elements can be the same or they can be different, in any order
20 and/or combination. In specific embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid
can comprise two or more "promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassettes," in which the
promoter, IRES and heterologous NOI in each cassette can be either different or the
same. Alternatively, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid can encode two or more
NOIs, one of which is controlled by a "promoter-IRES cassette," while the other
25 NOI(s) can be controlled by a subgenomic promoter alone or by an IRES alone.

The heterologous nucleic acid of this invention is a nucleic acid that is not
present in the genome of a wild type alphavirus and/or is not present in the genome of
a wild type alphavirus in the same order as it exists in a recombinant replicon nucleic
30 acid of this invention. For example, in certain embodiments, the heterologous nucleic
acid of this invention can encode one or more alphavirus structural proteins (e.g., C,
PE2/E2, E1, E3, 6K) and/or one or more alphavirus structural proteins in addition to a
heterologous nucleic acid. When the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this
invention comprises nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins,

the recombinant replicon nucleic acid can function as a recombinant replicon helper nucleic acid in the assembly of infectious, defective alphavirus particles, as described herein.

5 The heterologous nucleic acid of this invention can encode a protein or peptide, which can be, but is not limited to, an antigen, an immunogen or immunogenic polypeptide or peptide, a fusion protein, a fusion peptide, a cancer antigen, etc. Examples of proteins and/or peptides encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid of this invention include, but are not limited to, immunogenic
10 polypeptides and peptides suitable for protecting a subject against a disease, including but not limited to microbial, bacterial, protozoal, parasitic, and viral diseases.

In some embodiments, for example, the protein or peptide encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid can be an orthomyxovirus immunogen (e.g., an influenza
15 virus protein or peptide such as the influenza virus hemagglutinin (HA) surface protein or the influenza virus nucleoprotein, or an equine influenza virus protein or peptide), or a parainfluenza virus immunogen, or a metapneumovirus immunogen, or a respiratory syncytial virus immunogen, or a rhinovirus immunogen, a lentivirus immunogen (e.g., an equine infectious anemia virus protein or peptide, a Simian
20 Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV) protein or peptide, or a Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) protein or peptide, such as the HIV or SIV envelope GP160 protein, the HIV or SIV matrix/capsid proteins, and the HIV or SIV gag, pol and env gene products). The protein or peptide can also be an arenavirus immunogen (e.g., Lassa fever virus protein or peptide, such as the Lassa fever virus nucleocapsid protein and
25 the Lassa fever envelope glycoprotein), a picornavirus immunogen (e.g., a Foot and Mouth Disease virus protein or peptide), a poxvirus immunogen (e.g., a vaccinia protein or peptide, such as the vaccinia L1 or L8 protein), an orbivirus immunogen (e.g., an African horse sickness virus protein or peptide), a flavivirus immunogen (e.g., a yellow fever virus protein or peptide, a West Nile virus protein or peptide, or a
30 Japanese encephalitis virus protein or peptide), a filovirus immunogen (e.g., an Ebola virus protein or peptide, or a Marburg virus protein or peptide, such as NP and GP proteins), a bunyavirus immunogen (e.g., RVFV, CCHF, and SFS proteins or peptides), or a coronavirus immunogen (e.g., an infectious human coronavirus protein or peptide, such as the human coronavirus envelope glycoprotein, or a porcine

transmissible gastroenteritis virus protein or peptide, or an avian infectious bronchitis virus protein or peptide). The protein or polypeptide encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid of this invention can further be a polio antigen, herpes antigen (*e.g.*, CMV, EBV, HSV antigens) mumps antigen, measles antigen, rubella antigen, ,
5 varicella antigen, botulinum toxin, diphtheria toxin or other diphtheria antigen, pertussis antigen, hepatitis (*e.g.*, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Hepatitis D, or Hepatitis E) antigen, or any other vaccine antigen known in the art.

As used herein, "eliciting an immune response" and "immunizing a subject"
10 includes the development, in a subject, of a humoral and/or a cellular immune response to a protein and/or polypeptide of this invention (*e.g.*, an immunogen, an antigen, an immunogenic peptide, and/or one or more epitopes). A "humoral" immune response, as this term is well known in the art, refers to an immune response comprising antibodies, while a "cellular" immune response, as this term is well
15 known in the art, refers to an immune response comprising T-lymphocytes and other white blood cells, especially the immunogen-specific response by HLA-restricted cytolytic T-cells, *i.e.*, "CTLs." A cellular immune response occurs when the processed immunogens, *i.e.*, peptide fragments, are displayed in conjunction with the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) HLA proteins, which are of two general
20 types, class I and class II. Class I HLA-restricted CTLs generally bind 9-mer peptides and present those peptides on the cell surface. These peptide fragments in the context of the HLA Class I molecule are recognized by specific T-Cell Receptor (TCR) proteins on T-lymphocytes, resulting in the activation of the T-cell. The activation can result in a number of functional outcomes including, but not limited to expansion
25 of the specific T-cell subset resulting in destruction of the cell bearing the HLA-peptide complex directly through cytotoxic or apoptotic events or the activation of non-destructive mechanisms, *e.g.*, the production of interferon/cytokines. Presentation of immunogens via Class I MHC proteins typically stimulates a CD8+ CTL response.

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Another aspect of the cellular immune response involves the HLA Class II-restricted T-cell responses, involving the activation of helper T-cells, which stimulate and focus the activity of nonspecific effector cells against cells displaying the peptide fragments in association with the MHC molecules on their surface. At least two types

of helper cells are recognized: T-helper 1 cells (Th1), which secrete the cytokines interleukin 2 (IL-2) and interferon-gamma and T-helper 2 cells (Th2), which secrete the cytokines interleukin 4 (IL-4), interleukin 5 (IL-5), interleukin 6 (IL-6) and interleukin 10 (IL-10). Presentation of immunogens via Class II MHC proteins typically elicits a CD4+ CTL response as well as stimulation of B lymphocytes, which leads to an antibody response.

An "immunogenic polypeptide," "immunogenic peptide," or "immunogen" as used herein includes any peptide, protein or polypeptide that elicits an immune response in a subject and in certain embodiments, the immunogenic polypeptide is suitable for providing some degree of protection to a subject against a disease. These terms can be used interchangeably with the term "antigen."

In certain embodiments, the immunogen of this invention can comprise, consist essentially of, or consist of one or more "epitopes." An "epitope" is a set of amino acid residues that is involved in recognition by a particular immunoglobulin. In the context of T cells, an epitope is defined as the set of amino acid residues necessary for recognition by T cell receptor proteins and/or MHC receptors. In an immune system setting, *in vivo* or *in vitro*, an epitope refers to the collective features of a molecule, such as primary, secondary and/or tertiary peptide structure, and/or charge, that together form a site recognized by an immunoglobulin, T cell receptor and/or HLA molecule. In the case of a B-cell (antibody) epitope, it is typically a minimum of 3-4 amino acids, preferably at least 5, ranging up to approximately 50 amino acids. Preferably, the humoral response-inducing epitopes are between 5 and 30 amino acids, usually between 12 and 25 amino acids, and most commonly between 15 and 20 amino acids. In the case of a T-cell epitope, an epitope includes at least about 7-9 amino acids, and for a helper T-cell epitope, at least about 12-20 amino acids. Typically, such a T-cell epitope will include between about 7 and 15 amino acids, e.g., 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 or 15 amino acids.

The present invention can be employed to express a nucleic acid encoding an immunogenic polypeptide in a subject (*e.g.*, for vaccination) or for immunotherapy (*e.g.*, to treat a subject with cancer or tumors). Thus, in the case of vaccines, the present invention thereby provides methods of eliciting an immune response in a

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subject, comprising administering to the subject an immunogenic amount of a nucleic acid, particle, population and/or composition of this invention.

5 It is also contemplated that the nucleic acids, particles, populations and pharmaceutical compositions of this invention can be employed in methods of delivering a NOI of interest to a cell, which can be a cell in a subject. Thus, disclosed herein is a method of delivering a heterologous nucleic acid to a cell comprising introducing into a cell an effective amount of a nucleic acid, particle, population and/or composition of this invention. Also disclosed is a method of delivering a heterologous
10 nucleic acid to a cell in a subject, comprising delivering to the subject an effective amount of a nucleic acid, particle, population and/or composition of this invention. Such methods can be employed to impart a therapeutic effect on a cell and/or a subject of this invention, according to well known protocols for gene therapy.

15 A "subject" of this invention includes, but is not limited to, warm-blooded animals, e.g., humans, non-human primates, horses, cows, cats, dogs, pigs, rats, and mice. Administration of the various compositions of this invention (e.g., nucleic acids, particles, populations, pharmaceutical compositions) can be accomplished by any of several different routes. In specific embodiments, the compositions can be
20 administered intramuscularly, subcutaneously, intraperitoneally, intradermally, intranasally, intracranially, sublingually, intravaginally, intrarectally, orally, or topically. The compositions herein may be administered via a skin scarification method, or transdermally via a patch or liquid. The compositions can be delivered subdermally in the form of a biodegradable material that releases the compositions over a period of
25 time.

The compositions of this invention can be used prophylactically to prevent disease or therapeutically to treat disease. Diseases that can be treated include infectious disease caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi or parasites, and cancer. Chronic
30 diseases involving the expression of aberrant or abnormal proteins or the over-expression of normal proteins, can also be treated, e.g., Alzheimer's, disease multiple sclerosis, stroke, etc.

The compositions of this invention can be optimized and combined with other vaccination regimens to provide the broadest (i.e., all aspects of the immune response, including those features described hereinabove) cellular and humoral responses possible. In certain embodiments, this can include the use of heterologous prime-boost strategies, in which the compositions of this invention are used in combination with a composition comprising one or more of the following: immunogens derived from a pathogen or tumor, recombinant immunogens, naked nucleic acids, nucleic acids formulated with lipid-containing moieties, non-alphavirus vectors (including but not limited to pox vectors, adenoviral vectors, herpes vectors, vesicular stomatitis virus vectors, paramyxoviral vectors, parvovirus vectors, papovavirus vectors, retroviral vectors), and other alphavirus vectors. The viral vectors can be virus-like particles or nucleic acids. The alphavirus vectors can be replicon-containing particles, DNA-based replicon-containing vectors (sometimes referred to as an "ELVIS" system, see, for example, U.S. Patent No. 5,814,482) or naked RNA vectors.

The compositions of the present invention can also be employed to produce an immune response against chronic or latent infectious agents, which typically persist because they fail to elicit a strong immune response in the subject. Illustrative latent or chronic infectious agents include, but are not limited to, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, Epstein-Barr Virus, herpes viruses, human immunodeficiency virus, and human papilloma viruses. Alphavirus vectors encoding peptides and/or proteins from these infectious agents can be administered to a cell or a subject according to the methods described herein.

Alternatively, the immunogenic protein or peptide can be any tumor or cancer cell antigen. Preferably, the tumor or cancer antigen is expressed on the surface of the cancer cell. Exemplary cancer antigens for specific breast cancers are the HER2 and BRCA1 antigens. Other illustrative cancer and tumor cell antigens are described in S.A. Rosenberg, (1999) *Immunity* 10:281 and include, but are not limited to, MART-1/MelanA, gp100, tyrosinase, TRP-1, TRP-2, MAGE-1, MAGE-3, GAGE-1/2, BAGE, RAGE, NY-ESO-1, CDK-4, β -catenin, MUM-1, Caspase-8, KIAA0205, HPV E6, SART-1, PRAME, p15 and p53 antigens, Wilms' tumor antigen, tyrosinase, carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA), prostate specific antigen (PSA), prostate-specific

membrane antigen (PSMA), prostate stem cell antigen (PSCA), human aspartyl (asparaginy) β -hydroxylase (HAAH), and EphA2 (an epithelial cell tyrosine kinase, see International Patent Publication No. WO 01/12172).

5 The immunogenic polypeptide or peptide of this invention can also be a "universal" or "artificial" cancer or tumor cell antigen as described in international patent publication WO 99/51263, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety for the teachings of such antigens.

10 In various embodiments, the heterologous nucleic acid of this invention can encode an antisense nucleic acid sequence. An "antisense" nucleic acid is a nucleic acid molecule (i.e., DNA or RNA) that is complementary (i.e., able to hybridize *in vivo* or under stringent *in vitro* conditions) to all or a portion of a nucleic acid (e.g., a gene, a cDNA and/or mRNA) that encodes or is involved in the expression of nucleic
15 acid that encodes a polypeptide to be targeted for inhibited or reduced production by the action of the antisense nucleic acid. If desired, conventional methods can be used to produce an antisense nucleic acid that contains desirable modifications. For example, a phosphorothioate oligonucleotide can be used as the antisense nucleic acid to inhibit degradation of the antisense oligonucleotide by nucleases *in vivo*. Where the
20 antisense nucleic acid is complementary to a portion of the nucleic acid encoding the polypeptide to be targeted, the antisense nucleic acid should hybridize close enough to the 5' end of the nucleic acid encoding the polypeptide such that it inhibits translation of a functional polypeptide. Typically, this means that the antisense nucleic acid should be complementary to a sequence that is within the 5' half or third of the nucleic
25 acid to which it hybridizes.

 An antisense nucleic acid of this invention can also encode a catalytic RNA (i.e., a ribozyme) that inhibits expression of a target nucleic acid in a cell by hydrolyzing an mRNA encoding the targeted gene product. Additionally,
30 hammerhead RNA can be used as an antisense nucleic acid to prevent intron splicing. An antisense nucleic acid of this invention can be produced and tested according to protocols routine in the art for antisense technology.

The term "alphavirus" as used herein has its conventional meaning in the art, and includes Eastern Equine Encephalitis virus (EEE), Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis virus (VEE), Everglades virus, Mucambo virus, Pixuna virus, Western Encephalitis virus (WEE), Sindbis virus, South African Arbovirus No. 86 (S.A.AR86), Girdwood S.A. virus, Ockelbo virus, Semliki Forest virus, Middleburg virus, Chikungunya virus, O'Nyong-Nyong virus, Ross River virus, Barmah Forest virus, Getah virus, Sagiyama virus, Bebaru virus, Mayaro virus, Una virus, Aura virus, Whataroa virus, Babanki virus, Kyzlagach virus, Highlands J virus, Fort Morgan virus, Ndumu virus, Buggy Creek virus, and any other virus classified by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) as an alphavirus.

In specific embodiments of this invention, the nucleic acids and/or the proteins encoded by the nucleic acids of the present invention can comprise attenuating mutations. The phrases "attenuating mutation" and "attenuating amino acid," as used herein, include a nucleotide sequence containing a mutation, or an amino acid encoded by a nucleotide sequence containing a mutation, which results in a decreased probability of causing disease in its host (i.e., reduction in or "attenuation of" virulence), in accordance with standard terminology in the art. See, e.g., Davis et al., MICROBIOLOGY 132 (3d ed. 1980). The phrase "attenuating mutation" excludes mutations or combinations of mutations that would be lethal to the virus. However, it does include those otherwise lethal mutations that can be incorporated in combination with a resuscitating or rescuing mutation that leads to an attenuated phenotype.

Appropriate attenuating mutations will be dependent upon the alphavirus used, and will be known to those skilled in the art. Exemplary attenuating mutations include, but are not limited to, those described in United States Patent No. 5,505,947 to Johnston et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,185,440 to Johnston et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,643,576 to Davis et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,792,462 to Johnston et al., and U.S. Patent No. 5,639,650 to Johnston et al., the disclosures of each of which are incorporated herein in their entireties by reference.

In various embodiments of this invention, one or more of the alphavirus structural proteins of the alphavirus particles of this invention can comprise one or more attenuating mutations, for example, as defined in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,792,462

and 6,156,558. Specific attenuating mutations for the VEE E1 glycoprotein can include an attenuating mutation at any one of E1 amino acid positions 81, 272 and/or 253. Alphavirus particles made from the VEE-3042 mutant contain an isoleucine substitution at E1-81, and virus particles made from the VEE-3040 mutant contain an
5 attenuating mutation at E1-253. Specific attenuating mutations for the VEE E2 glycoprotein can include an attenuating mutation at any one of E2 amino acid positions 76, 120, or 209. Alphavirus particles made from the VEE-3014 mutant contain attenuating mutations at both E1-272 and at E2-209 (see U.S. Patent No. 5,792,492). A specific attenuating mutation for the VEE E3 glycoprotein includes an
10 attenuating mutation consisting of a deletion of E3 amino acids 56-59. Virus particles made from the VEE-3526 mutant contain this deletion in E3 (aa56-59) as well as a second attenuating mutation at E1-253. Specific attenuating mutations for the S.A.AR86 E2 glycoprotein include an attenuating mutation at any one of E2 amino acid positions 304, 314, 372, or 376. Alternatively, the attenuating mutation can be a
15 substitution, deletion and/or insertion of an amino acid in the E2 glycoprotein, for example, at any one or more of the following amino acid positions in any combination: 158, 159, 160, 161 and 162 (see Polo et al., PCT Publication No. WO 00/61772, the entire contents of which are incorporated by reference herein).

20 Another attenuating mutation of this invention can be an attenuating mutation at nucleotide 3 of the VEE genomic RNA, *i.e.*, the third nucleotide following the 5' methylated cap (*see, e.g.*, U.S. Patent No. 5,643,576, describing a G→C mutation at nt 3). The mutation can be a G→A, U or C, but can also be a G→A mutation in some embodiments.

25 When the alphavirus structural and/or non-structural proteins are from S.A.AR86, exemplary attenuating mutations in the structural and non-structural proteins include, but are not limited to, codons at nsp1 amino acid position 538 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably isoleucine as nsp1 amino acid 538; codons at E2
30 amino acid position 304 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably threonine as E2 amino acid 304; codons at E2 amino acid position 314 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably lysine as E2 amino acid 314; codons at E2 amino acid 372 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably leucine, at E2 amino acid residue 372; codons at E2 amino acid position 376 which specify an attenuating amino

acid, preferably alanine as E2 amino acid 376; in combination, codons at E2 amino acid residues 304, 314, 372 and 376 which specify attenuating amino acids, as described above; codons at nsp2 amino acid position 96 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably glycine as nsp2 amino acid 96; and codons at nsp2 amino acid position 372
5 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably valine as nsp2 amino acid 372; in combination, codons at nsp2 amino acid residues 96 and 372 which encode attenuating amino acids at nsp2 amino acid residues 96 and 372, as described above; codons at nsp2 amino acid residue 529 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably leucine, at nsp2 amino acid residue 529; codons at nsp2 amino acid residue 571 which specify an
10 attenuating amino acid, preferably asparagine, at nsp2 amino acid residue 571; codons at nsp2 amino acid residue 682 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably arginine, at nsp2 amino acid residue 682; codons at nsp2 amino acid residue 804 which specify an attenuating amino acid, preferably arginine, at nsp2 amino acid residue 804; codons at nsp3 amino acid residue 22 which specify an attenuating amino acid,
15 preferably arginine, at nsp3 amino acid residue 22; and in combination, codons at nsp2 amino acid residues 529, 571, 682 and 804 and at nsp3 amino acid residue 22 which specify attenuating amino acids, as described above.

Other illustrative attenuating mutations include those described in PCT
20 Application No. PCT/US01/27644 (the disclosure of which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference). For example, the attenuating mutation can be an attenuating mutation at amino acid position 537 of the S.A.AR86 nsp3 protein, more preferably a substitution mutation at this position, still more preferably a nonsense mutation that results in substitution of a termination codon. Translational termination (*i.e.*, stop)
25 codons are known in the art, and include the "opal" (UGA), "amber" (UAG) and "ochre" (UAA) termination codons. In embodiments of the invention, the attenuating mutation can result in a Cys→opal substitution at S.A.AR86 nsp3 amino acid position 537.

30 Further exemplary attenuating mutations can include an attenuating insertion mutation following amino acid 385 of the S.A.AR86 nsp3 protein. The insertion can comprise an insertion of at least 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 or 20 amino acids. In some embodiments of the invention, the inserted amino acid sequence is rich in serine and

threonine residues (e.g., comprises at least 2, 4, 6, or 8 such sites) that serve as a substrate for phosphorylation by serine/threonine kinases.

5 In certain embodiments, the attenuating mutation can comprise insertion of the amino acid sequence Ile-Thr-Ser-Met-Asp-Ser-Trp-Ser-Ser-Gly-Pro-Ser-Ser-Leu-Glu-Ile-Val-Asp (**SEQ ID NO:1**) following amino acid 385 of nsp3 (*i.e.*, the first amino acid is designated as amino acid 386 in nsp3). In other embodiments of the invention, the insertion mutation can comprise insertion of a fragment of **SEQ ID NO:1** that results in an attenuated phenotype. The fragment can comprise at least 4,
10 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16 or 17 contiguous amino acids from **SEQ ID NO:1**.

Those skilled in the art will appreciate that other attenuating insertion sequences comprising a fragment of the sequence set forth above, or which incorporate conservative amino acid substitutions into the sequence set forth above,
15 can be routinely identified by routine methods (as described above). While not wishing to be bound by any theory of the invention, it appears that the insertion sequence of **SEQ ID NO:1** is highly phosphorylated at serine residues, which confers an attenuated phenotype. Thus, other attenuating insertion sequences that serve as substrates for serine (or threonine) phosphorylation can be identified by conventional
20 techniques known in the art. Alternatively, or additionally, there is a Tyr→Ser substitution at amino acid 385 of the S.A.AR86 nsp3 protein (*i.e.*, just prior to the insertion sequence above). This sequence is conserved in the non-virulent Sindbis-group viruses, but is deleted from S.A.AR86

25 In other embodiments, the alphavirus of this invention can be any Sindbis virus strain (e.g., TR339), VEE (having a mutation at nucleotide 3 of the genomic RNA following the methylated cap), S.A.AR86 virus, Girdwood S.A. virus, Ockelbo virus, and/or chimeric viruses thereof. The complete genomic sequences, as well as the sequences of the various structural and non-structural proteins, are known in the art for
30 numerous alphaviruses and include: Sindbis virus genomic sequence (GenBank Accession No. J02363, NCBI Accession No. NC_001547), S.A.AR86 genomic sequence (GenBank Accession No. U38305), VEE genomic sequence (GenBank Accession No. L04653, NCBI Accession No. NC_001449), Girdwood S.A. genomic sequence (GenBank Accession No. U38304), Semliki Forest virus genomic sequence

(GenBank Accession No. X04129, NCBI Accession No. NC_003215), and the TR339 genomic sequence (Klimstra et al. (1988) *J. Virol.* 72:7357; McKnight et al. (1996) *J. Virol.* 70:1981).

5 In particular embodiments of the present invention, the alphavirus structural protein of this invention can be a Sindbis virus structural protein, a SFV structural protein, a VEE structural protein, a Ross River virus structural protein, a S.A. AR86 structural protein, an EEE structural protein and/or a WEE structural protein. Those can be present in any combination with one another and can be present in combination
10 with any alphavirus nonstructural proteins and/or other alphaviral sequences, such as the 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, the alphavirus subgenomic promoter and the 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, from any of these and/or other alphaviruses, to produce chimeric recombinant alphavirus particles and/or chimeric recombinant nucleic acids of this invention.

15 In further embodiments, the IRES element of this invention directs the translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid of the recombinant nucleic acid of this invention, such that at least 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, 30%, 35%, 40%, 45%, 50%, 55%, 60%, 65%, 70%, 75%, 80%, 85%, 90%, 92%,
20 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, 99% or 100% of the translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid is controlled by the activity of the IRES element. The percentage of translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid in the recombinant replicon nucleic acids of this invention as controlled by the IRES can be determined according to assays well known in the
25 art and as described in the Examples section provided herein.

Furthermore, in embodiments of this invention wherein the IRES element of this invention directs the translation of an alphavirus structural protein present in a helper construct of this invention, the IRES element of this invention can direct the
30 translation of the structural protein(s), such that at least 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, 30%, 35%, 40%, 45%, 50%, 55%, 60%, 65%, 70%, 75%, 80%, 85%, 90%, 92%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, 99% or 100% of the translation of the structural protein is controlled by the activity of the IRES element. The percentage of translation of the structural protein(s) as controlled by the IRES element of this invention can be

determined according to assays well known in the art and as described in the Examples section provided herein.

The nucleic acid of this invention can be RNA or DNA.

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Also disclosed is a series of helper nucleic acids ("helper constructs" or "helper molecules"), i.e., recombinant DNA or RNA molecules that express one or more alphavirus structural proteins. In one set of RNA embodiments, the helper construct comprises a first nucleic acid sequence encoding (i) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, (ii) a transcriptional promoter, (iii) a nucleic acid sequence encoding at least one, but not all, alphavirus structural proteins, and (iv) an alphavirus 3' replication recognition sequence. In certain embodiments, the E1 and E2 glycoproteins are encoded by one helper construct, and the capsid protein is encoded by another separate helper construct. In another embodiment, the E1 glycoprotein, E2 glycoprotein, and capsid protein are each encoded by separate helper constructs. In other embodiments, the capsid protein and one of the glycoproteins are encoded by one helper construct, and the other glycoprotein is encoded by a separate second helper construct. In yet further embodiments, the capsid protein and glycoprotein E1 are encoded by one helper construct and the capsid protein and glycoprotein E2 are encoded by a separate helper construct. In certain embodiments, the helper constructs of this invention do not include an alphavirus packaging signal.

Alternatively, the above-described helper nucleic acids are constructed as DNA molecules, which can be stably integrated into the genome of a helper cell or expressed from an episome (e.g., an EBV derived episome). The DNA molecule can also be transiently expressed in a cell. The DNA molecule can be any vector known in the art, including but not limited to, a non-integrating DNA vector, such as a plasmid, or a viral vector. The DNA molecule can encode one or all of the alphavirus structural proteins, in any combination, as described herein.

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The helper constructs of this invention are introduced into "helper cells," which are used to produce the alphavirus particles of this invention. As noted above, the nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins can be present in the helper

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cell transiently or by stable integration into the genome of the helper cell. The nucleic acid encoding the alphavirus structural proteins that are used to produce alphavirus particles of this invention can be under the control of constitutive and/or inducible promoters. As also noted above, the alpha virus structural protein coding sequences
5 can be provided on a recombinant replicon nucleic acid and/or a helper construct comprising an IRES element and the translation of these coding sequences can be controlled by the activity of an IRES element. In such embodiments, the IRES element can be active in the specific helper cell type and not active, or minimally active in other cells types. In particular embodiments, the helper cells of the invention
10 comprise nucleic acid sequences encoding the alphavirus structural proteins in a combination and/or amount sufficient to produce an alphavirus particle of this invention when a recombinant replicon nucleic acid is introduced into the cell under conditions whereby the alphavirus structural proteins are produced and the recombinant replicon nucleic acid is packaged into alphavirus particle of this
15 invention.

In all of the embodiments of this invention, it is contemplated that at least one of the alphavirus structural and/or non-structural proteins encoded by the recombinant replicon nucleic acid and/or helper molecules, and/or the nontranslated regions of the
20 recombinant replicon and/or helper nucleic acid, can contain one or more attenuating mutations in any combination, as described herein and as are well known in the literature.

In particular constructs of this invention, a promoter for directing transcription
25 of RNA from DNA, i.e., a DNA dependent RNA polymerase, is employed. In the RNA helper and replicon embodiments of this invention, the promoter is utilized to synthesize RNA in an *in vitro* transcription reaction, and specific promoters suitable for this use include, but are not limited to, the SP6, T7, and T3 RNA polymerase promoters. In the DNA helper embodiments, the promoter functions within a cell to
30 direct transcription of RNA. Potential promoters for *in vivo* transcription of the construct include, but are not limited to, eukaryotic promoters such as RNA polymerase II promoters, RNA polymerase III promoters, or viral promoters such as MMTV and MoSV LTR, SV40 early region, RSV or CMV. Many other suitable mammalian and viral promoters for the present invention are available and are known

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in the art. Alternatively, DNA dependent RNA polymerase promoters from bacteria or bacteriophage, e.g., SP6, T7, and T3, can be employed for use *in vivo*, with the matching RNA polymerase being provided to the cell, either via a separate plasmid, RNA vector, or viral vector. In a specific embodiment, the matching RNA polymerase

5 can be stably transformed into a helper cell line under the control of an inducible promoter. Constructs that function within a cell can function as autonomous plasmids transfected into the cell and/or they can be stably transformed into the genome. In a stably transformed cell line, the promoter can be an inducible promoter, so that the cell will only produce the RNA polymerase encoded by the stably transformed construct

10 when the cell is exposed to the appropriate stimulus (inducer). The helper constructs are introduced into the stably transformed cell concomitantly with, prior to, and/or after exposure to, the inducer, thereby effecting expression of the alphavirus structural proteins. Alternatively, constructs designed to function within a cell can be introduced into the cell via a viral vector, such as, e.g., adenovirus, poxvirus, adeno-associated

15 virus, SV40, retrovirus, nodavirus, picornavirus, vesicular stomatitis virus, and baculoviruses with mammalian pol II promoters.

Also disclosed herein, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid and/or helper nucleic acid can comprise a spacer nucleic acid, which can be located upstream of an

20 IRES element in a recombinant replicon nucleic acid and/or helper nucleic acid of this invention. The spacer nucleic acid can comprise, consist essentially of, or consist of any random or specific non-coding nucleic acid sequence which is of a length sufficient to prevent at least some, and in some embodiments, all translation from the 5' cap of a messenger RNA, such that translation is then directed by the IRES, in part or in whole.

25 Alternatively, the spacer nucleic acid can be of a length and sequence structure that imparts sufficient secondary structure to the nucleic acid to prevent at least some and possibly all translation activity from the 5' cap of a messenger RNA.

As one example, a commercially available plasmid, pCDNA 3.1(-), was

30 digested with a restriction enzyme, AluI, which cuts frequently within this plasmid, thus generating many random and differently sized fragments (see Example 3 for details). The pCDNA plasmid is 5427 nucleotides in length, and is a eukaryotic

expression vector, comprising various promoters (CMV, T7, SV40) for expression of an inserted nucleic acid as well as polyadenylation signals and antibiotic resistance genes. The AluI enzyme cuts throughout these elements, providing a range of random fragments. Examples of several different spacers and their sequences that were
 5 generated from this example and which do not encode any functional elements from the plasmid, are provided hereinbelow:

357 nucleotide spacer:
 10 CTGAATGAAGCCATACCAAACGACGAGCGTGACACCACGATGCCTGTAGC
 AATGGCAACAACGTTGCGCAAATTAAGTGGCGAACTACTTACTCTAG
 CTACCAACTCTTTTCCGAAGGTAAGTGGCTTCAGCAGAGCGCAGATACC
 AAATACTGTTCTTCTAGTGTAGCCGTAGTTAGGCCACCACTTCAAGAAGT
 TGTAGCACCGCTACATACCTCGCTCTGCTAATCCTGTTACCAAGTGGCTGC
 15 TGCCAGTGGCGATAAGTCGTGCTTACCGGGTTGGACTCAAGACGATAGT
 TACCGGATAAGGCGCAGCGGTCGGGCTGAACGGGGGGTTTCGTGCACACA
 GCCCAG

342 nucleotide spacer:
 20 CTATCCAGAAAGTAGTGAGGAGGCTTTTTGGAGGCCTAGGCTTTTGCAA
 AAGCTTGTATATCCATTTTCGGATCTGATCAAGAGACAGGATGAGGATCG
 TTTCCGATGATTGAACAAGATGGATTGCACGCAGGTTCTCCGGCCGCTTGG
 GTGGAGAGGCTATTCGGCTATGACTGGGCACAACAGACAATCGGCTGCTC
 TGATGCCGCCGTTTCCGGCTGTACGCGCAGGGGCGCCCGGTTCTTTTGT
 CAAGACCGACCTGTCCGGTGCCTGAATGAACTGCAGGACGAGGCAGCGC
 25 GGCTATCGTGGCTGGCCACGACGGGCGTTCCTTGCGCAG

257 nucleotide spacer:
 30 CTCATTTTTAAACCAATAGGCCGAAATCGGCAAAATCCCTTATAAATCAAA
 AGAATAGACCGAGATAGGGTTGAGTGTGTTCCAGTTTGAACAAGAGTC
 CACTATTAAGAACGTGGACTCCAACGTCAAAGGGCGAAAAACCGTCTAT
 CAGGGCGATGGCCACTACGTGAACCATCACCTAATCAAGTTTTTTGGG
 GTCGAGGTGCCGTAAAGCACTAAATCGGAACCCTAAAGGGAGCCCCGAT
 TTAGAG

383 nucleotide spacer:
 35 CTGCGCAAGGAACGCCCGTCGTGGCCAGCCACGATAGCCGCGCTGCCTCG
 TCCTGCAGTTCATTCAGGGCACCGACAGGTCGGTCTTGACAAAAAGAAC
 CGGGCGCCCTGCGCTGACAGCCGGAACACGGCGGCATCAGAGCAGCCG
 ATTGTCTGTTGTGCCAGTCAATAGCCGAATAGCCTCTCCACCAAGCGGCC
 40 GGAGAACCTGCGTGCAATCCATCTTGTTCATCATGCGAAACGATCCATCAT
 CCTGTCTTTGATCAGATCCGAAAATGGATATACAAGCTCACTCATTAGGC
 ACCCCAGGCTTACACTTATGCTTCCGGCTCGTATGTTGTGTGGAATTGT
 GAGCGGATAACAATTTACACAGGAAACAG

579 nucleotide spacer:
 CTGCAATAAAACAAGTTGGGGTGGGCGAAGAAGCTCCAGCATGAGATCCCCG
 CGCTGGAGGATCATCCAGCCGGCGTCCCGGAAAAACGATTCCGAAGCCCAA
 5 CCTTTCATAGAAGGCGGCGGTGGAATCGAAATCTTCGTGATGGCAGGTTGG
 GCGTCGCTTGGTCGGTCATTTTCAACCCAGAGTCCCGCTCAGAAGAACT
 CGTCAAGAAGGCGATAGAAGGCGATGCGCTGCGAAATCGGGAGCGGCGAT
 ACCGTAAAGCACGAGGAAGCGGTACGCCATTTCGCCGCAAGCTTGATA
 10 TCCATTTTCGGATCTGATCAAGAGACAGGATGAGGATCGTTTCGCATGATT
 GAACAAGATGGATTGCACGCAGGTTCTCCGGCCGCTTGGGTGGAGAGGCT
 ATTCGGCTATGACTGGGCACAACAGACAATCGGCTGCTCTGATGCCGCCG
 TGTTCCGGCTGTCAGCGCAGGGGCGCCCGGTTCTTTTGTCAAGACCGACC
 TGTCCGGTGCCTGAATGAACTGCAGGACGAGGCAGCGCGGCTATCGTGG
 CTGGCCACGACGGGCGTTCCTTGCGCAG
 15

749 nucleotide spacer:
 CTGCAATAAAACAAGTTGGGGTGGGCGAAGAAGCTCCAGCATGAGATCCCCG
 CGCTGGAGGATCATCCAGCCGGCGTCCCGGAAAAACGATTCCGAAGCCCAA
 20 CCTTTCATAGAAGGCGGCGGTGGAATCGAAATCTTCGTGATGGCAGGTTGG
 GCGTCGCTTGGTCGGTCATTTTCAACCCAGAGTCCCGCTCAGAAGAACT
 CGTCAAGAAGGCGATAGAAGGCGATGCGCTGCGAAATCGGGAGCGGCGAT
 ACCGTAAAGCACGAGGAAGCGGTACGCCATTTCGCCGCAAGCTTCTCAG
 CAATATCACGGGTAGCCAACGCTATGTCTGTATAGCGGTCCGCCACACCC
 AGCCGGCCACAGTCGATGAATCCAGAAAAGCGGCCATTTTCCACCATGAT
 25 ATTCGGCAAGCAGGCATCGCCATGGGTCACGACGAGATCCTCGCCGTCGG
 GCATGCGCGCCTTGAGCCTGGCGAACAGTTCGGCTGGCGCGAGCCCCTGA
 TGCTCTTCGTCCAGATCATCCTGATCGACAAGACCGGCTTCCATCCGAGTA
 CGTGCTCGCTCGATGCGATGTTTCGCTTGGTGGTCGAATGGGCAGGTAGCC
 GGATCAAGCGTATGCAGCCGCGCATTCATCAGCCATGATGGATACTTT
 30 CTCGGCAGGAGCAAGGTGAGATGACAGGAGATCCTGCCCGGCACTTCGC
 CCAATAGCAGCCAGTCCCCTCCCGCTTCAGTGACAACGTCGAGCACAG

In addition to the use of random nucleic acid fragments generated from an
 unrelated plasmid (as in the AluI fragments described above), it is also possible to use
 35 fragments from cellular or viral genes, e.g., from the 5' non-coding regions of genes,
 as spacers. One approach is to use the non-coding sequences surrounding an existing
 IRES (see Example 4B.4.); another approach is to use the 5' non-coding region of an
 alphaviral gene, e.g., the capsid gene (see Example 4A.2.)

40 Thus, it is contemplated that the spacer nucleic acid of this invention can be at
 a minimum, at least 25 nucleic acids in length and can be as long as permissible in a
 given recombinant replicon nucleic acid. For example, the spacer nucleic acid of this
 invention can be, in certain embodiments, approximately 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60,
 65, 75, 80, 85, 90, 95, 100, 110, 115, 120, 125, 130, 135, 140, 145, 150, 160, 170,

175, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 225, 230, 235, 240, 245, 250, 275, 300, 325, 350, 375,
400, 425, 450, 475, 50, 600, 700, 800, 900, 1000, 1500, 2000, 2500, 3000, 3500, 4000,
4500, 5000, 5500, 6000, 6500, 7000, 7500, 8000, 8500, 9000, 9500, or 10,000
nucleotides in length. By "approximately" it is meant that the spacer nucleic acid can
5 vary up to 10%, 15%, 20% and/or 25% in length.

The spacer nucleic acid of this invention can also be a nucleotide sequence
placed 3' to a 5' sequence for initiating transcription of a messenger RNA, and 5' to a
functional IRES element, wherein the level of translation directed from said IRES
10 element is at least approximately five fold higher than the level obtained from a non-
functional IRES element. In preferred embodiments, the level of translation is at least
approximately 10-fold, 20-fold, 50-fold, 100-fold, 150-fold, 180-fold, 200- fold, 300-
fold, 400-fold or 500-fold higher. In other embodiments, at least 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%,
50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 85%, 90%, 92%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, 99% or 100% of
15 the translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous nucleic acid and/or the
structural protein(s) encoded by an IRES-containing helper construct is controlled by
the activity of the IRES element.

Also disclosed is an alphavirus particle comprising a recombinant replicon
20 nucleic acid of this invention. Also disclosed is a population of infectious, defective,
alphavirus particles, wherein each particle contains an alphavirus replicon RNA
comprising the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention. In some
embodiments, the population of this invention has no detectable replication-competent
virus, as measured by passage on cell culture and/or other well known assays for
25 detection of replication competent virus.

Disclosed herein is a pharmaceutical composition comprising a nucleic acid,
vector, particle and/or population of this invention in a pharmaceutically acceptable
carrier. By "pharmaceutically acceptable" is meant a material that is not biologically or
30 otherwise undesirable, i.e., the material may be administered to an individual along with
the selected peptide, polypeptide, nucleic acid, vector or cell without causing substantial
deleterious biological effects or interacting in a deleterious manner with any of the other
components of the composition in which it is contained.

Furthermore, any of the compositions of this invention can comprise a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier and a suitable adjuvant. As used herein, "suitable adjuvant" describes an adjuvant capable of being combined with the peptide or polypeptide of this invention to further enhance an immune response without deleterious effect on the subject or the cell of the subject. A suitable adjuvant can be, but is not limited to, MONTANIDE ISA51 (Seppic, Inc., Fairfield, NJ), SYNTEX adjuvant formulation 1 (SAF-1), composed of 5 percent (wt/vol) squalene (DASF, Parsippany, N.J.), 2.5 percent Pluronic, L121 polymer (Aldrich Chemical, Milwaukee), and 0.2 percent polysorbate (Tween 80, Sigma) in phosphate-buffered saline. Other suitable adjuvants are well known in the art and include QS-21, Freund's adjuvant (complete and incomplete), aluminum salts (alum), aluminum phosphate, aluminum hydroxide, N-acetyl-muramyl-L-threonyl-D-isoglutamine (thr-MDP), N-acetyl-nor-muramyl-L-alanyl-D-isoglutamine (CGP 11637, referred to as nor-MDP), N-acetylmuramyl-L-alanyl-D-isoglutaminyl-L-alanine-2-(1'-2'-dipalmitoyl-sn-glycero-3-hydroxyphosphoryloxy)-ethylamine (CGP 19835A, referred to as MTP-PE) and RIBI, which contains three components extracted from bacteria, monophosphoryl lipid A, trealose dimycolate and cell wall skeleton (MPL+TDM+CWS) in 2% squalene/Tween 80 emulsion. Adjuvants can be combined, either with the compositions of this invention or with other vaccine compositions that can be used in combination with the compositions of this invention. Examples of adjuvants can also include, but are not limited to, oil-in-water emulsion formulations, immunostimulating agents, such as bacterial cell wall components or synthetic molecules, or oligonucleotides (e.g. CpGs) and nucleic acid polymers (both double stranded and single stranded RNA and DNA), which can incorporate alternative backbone moieties, e.g., polyvinyl polymers.

The compositions of the present invention can also include other medicinal agents, pharmaceutical agents, carriers, diluents, immunostimulatory cytokines, etc. Actual methods of preparing such dosage forms are known, or will be apparent, to those skilled in this art. Preferred dosages for alphavirus replicon particles, as contemplated by this invention, can range from 10^3 to 10^{10} particles per dose. For humans, 10^6 , 10^7 or 10^8 are preferred doses. A dosage regimen can be one or more doses hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, etc. as deemed necessary to achieve the

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desired prophylactic and/or therapeutic effect to be achieved by administration of a composition of this invention to a subject. The efficacy of a particular dosage can be determined according to methods well known in the art.

5 Also disclosed is a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising: a) introducing into a cell the following:

(i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid of this invention, and (ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins, wherein the one or more helper nucleic acids produce all of the alphavirus structural proteins, and b) producing said
10 alphavirus particles in the cell. In some embodiments, the recombinant replicon nucleic acid can comprise at least one heterologous nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein.

15 In other embodiments of the methods of this invention, the helper nucleic acid can be a recombinant nucleic acid comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

20 In further embodiments, the helper nucleic acid can be a recombinant nucleic acid (which can be DNA) comprising a promoter (e.g., a CMV promoter) and nucleotide sequences encoding one or more, including all, alphavirus structural proteins.

25 The helper nucleic acid of this invention can comprise nucleic acid sequences encoding any one or more of the alphavirus structural proteins (C, E1, E2) in any order and/or in any combination. Thus, a helper cell can comprise as many helper nucleic acids as needed in order to provide all of the alphavirus structural proteins necessary to produce alphavirus particles. A helper cell can also comprise helper nucleic acid(s) stably integrated into the genome of a helper (e.g., packaging) cell. In such helper cells,
30 the alphavirus structural proteins can be produced under the control of a promoter that can be an inducible promoter.

In some embodiments, the helper nucleic acid employed in the methods of this invention can be a recombinant nucleic acid comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

5

In further embodiments, the helper nucleic acid can be a recombinant nucleic acid comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

10

Additionally disclosed herein is a method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising: a) introducing into a cell the following: i) an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, nucleic acid sequence(s) encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a heterologous nucleic acid sequence and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; and ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

A method is also disclosed herein of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising: a) introducing into a cell the following: i) an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, nucleic acid sequence(s) encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins, at least one alphavirus subgenomic promoter, at least one IRES element, at least one heterologous nucleic acid sequence and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; and ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins and a 3'

25
30

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alphavirus replication recognition sequence, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

5 The methods of making alphavirus particles of this invention can further comprise the step of collecting said alphavirus particles from the cell.

10 Also disclosed is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins in any combination and/or order and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence. In some embodiments, this recombinant helper nucleic acid can comprise a spacer nucleotide sequence that can be upstream of an IRES element. Also disclosed is a vector and/or a cell comprising this recombinant nucleic acid.

15 Additionally disclosed herein is recombinant nucleic acid comprising:
a first nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;
at least one second nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein;
a first alphavirus subgenomic promoter; a first IRES element; a first heterologous
nucleic acid; a second alphavirus subgenomic promoter; a second IRES element; a third
20 nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence. In some
embodiments, the first and second alphavirus subgenomic promoter can be the same or
different, the first and second IRES element can be the same or different and/or the first
and second heterologous nucleic acid can be the same or different. This recombinant
nucleic acid can comprise an alphavirus packaging signal and/or a spacer nucleotide
25 sequence that can be upstream of an IRES element. This recombinant nucleic acid can
also comprise one or more second nucleic acid sequences encoding alphavirus
nonstructural proteins in any order and/or combination, such that all four of the
alphavirus nonstructural protein coding sequences are present on the recombinant
nucleic acid. This recombinant nucleic acid can be present in an alphavirus particle of
30 this invention and such particles can be present as a population of this invention and/or
in a pharmaceutical composition of this invention.

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Also disclosed is a recombinant replicon nucleic acid as described above, further comprising a third or further additional alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a third or further additional IRES element and/or a third or further additional heterologous nucleic acid. This recombinant nucleic acid can be present in an alphavirus particle of this invention and such particles can be present as a population of this invention and/or in a pharmaceutical composition of this invention. Alphavirus particles comprising this embodiment of recombinant nucleic acid can be produced according to any of the methods of this invention and can be used in any of the methods of eliciting an immune response and/or delivering a NOI to a cell.

Also disclosed is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising: a promoter that directs transcription of a nucleic acid; an IRES element; and a nucleic acid comprising a coding sequence, wherein the IRES element is operably located such that translation of the coding sequence is via a cap-independent mechanism directed by the IRES element. In this embodiment, transcription of the nucleic acid is uncoupled from translation of the nucleic acid.

It is understood that the foregoing detailed description is given merely by way of illustration and that modifications and variations may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

EXAMPLES

5 **Example 1.** Construction of transfer cloning vectors.

A. EMCV IRES-containing vectors

10 A transfer vector (pCDNA3.3) was prepared into which the
encephalomyocarditis (EMCV) IRES sequence and any NOI could be introduced.
Plasmid pCDNA3.1(+) (Nitrogen) was digested with restriction enzyme *Bat*he and
treated with T4 DNA polymerase to eliminate the unique *Bat*he restriction site,
resulting in generation of pCDNA3.2. The pCDNA3.2 DNA was further digested
15 with restriction enzyme *Bay* and also treated with T4 DNA polymerase to remove the
unique *Bay* restriction site, resulting in generation of pCDNA3.3.

An intermediate cloning vector containing the multiple cloning site (MCS)
from a VEE replicon vector was prepared by ligating an ~250bp *Apa*I/*Not*I MCS
fragment into *Apa*I/*Not*I linearized pBluescript KS+ (Stratagene) DNA, generating
20 pKS-rep2. The EMCV IRES was digested from pD1+2+3 (Kaminski et al., 1995)
with restriction enzymes *Eco*RI and *Bam*HI and ligated into *Eco*RI and *Bam*HI
linearized pKS-rep2 DNA, generating pKS-rep2/EMCV. The EMCV IRES and MCS
sequence from the pKS-rep2/EMCV vector were PCR amplified using primers
EMCVF(*Asc*I).2 and *EMCVR*(*Asc*I).1 (Table 1). The EMCV PCR product was
25 digested with *Asc*I restriction enzyme and ligated into *Asc*I linearized VEE replicon
(pERK) vector DNA, generating pERK/EMCV. To complete the transfer cloning
vector, pERK/EMCV DNA was digested with *Eco*RV and *Not*I restriction enzymes
and the 862 bp *Eco*RV/*Not*I fragment was ligated into *Eco*RV and *Not*I linearized
pCDNA3.3 DNA, generating pCDNA3.3/EMCV. The sequence of the EMCV IRES
30 and associated multiple cloning sites was confirmed in the pCDNA3.3/EMCV vector
before preparing further constructs with it.

Table 1.

Primer name	5'	Primer sequence	3'
EMCVF(AscI).2		TGGCGCGCCGCTCGGAATCCCCCTCTCCC	
EMCVR(AscI).1		AGGCGCGCCTTCTATGTAAAGCAGCTTGCC	
F ² -CAT(BamHI)		GCTGGATCCATGGAGAAAAAATCACTGGA	
R ² -CAT(XbaI)		CGATCTAGATTACGCCCGCCCTGCCACTCA	
Anti-En(EcoRI)		CGGAATTCATTATCATCGTGTGTTTTTC	
Anti-EN(BamHI)		CGGGATCCCCCTAACGTTACTGGCCGAAGC	
Anti-En(AscI)		AGGCGCGCCATTATCATCGTGTGTTTTTC	
dAvr En(AscI)		AGGCGCGCCCTAGGGGTCTTCCCCCTCTC	
R			
3'UTR4Xbiotin		GCGGCATGCCAATCGCCGCGAGTTCTATGTAAAGCAGCTTGCC	
GAG-F		CGGGATCCATGGCTGCGAGAGCGTCA	
GAG-R		CGGGATCCTTATTGAGACAAGGGGTGCG	

B. XIAP IRES-containing vectors

5 The X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis (XIAP) gene 5' noncoding region (NCR) containing the putative IRES element (see Holcik et al. (1999) *Nature Cell Biol* 1: 190-192; Holcik and Korneluk (2000) *Mol Cell Biol* 20:4648-57 and Holcik et al. (2003) *Mol Cell Biol* 23:280-288 for sequence and size of element) was PCR

10 amplified from human fetal liver marathon ready cDNA (Clontech, Palo Alto, CA) using an adaptor primer supplied with the cDNA and an XIAP reverse primer (XIAP-R) followed by a nested PCR using XIAP IRES specific primers. Primers are listed in Table 2. Resulting PCR products of approximately 1007 and 241 bp were TA cloned using a commercially available kit (Invitrogen Corporation; Carlsbad, CA). These

15 constructs possess either 844 nucleotides or 78 nucleotides, respectively, of the XIAP gene noncoding region, in addition to the 163 nucleotide putative XIAP IRES. Sequences for each construct were confirmed by automated DNA sequencing. To generate shuttle vectors for cloning into the VEE replicon, the XIAP sequences were transferred as an EcoRI fragment into the equivalent site of pKS-rep2, generating

20 pKS-rep2/XIAP1007 and pKS-rep2/XIAP241 DNAs.

Table 2

XIAP-R	5'-CCCTGCTCGTGCCAGTGTGATGC-3'
XIAP/RES-1007	5'-ACACGTGGGGCAACCCTGATTTATGCCTGTTGTCC-3'
XIAP/RES-241	5'-AGTTAACTCAAAAAGAGAAAACAAAATGC
XIAP/RES-R	5'-AGATATCTTCTCTTGAAAATAGGACTTGTCCAC-3'
Cap5'F	5'-GTTCCCGTCCAGCCAATGTATCCG-3'
13-87pr1	5'-GTCACTAGTGACCACCATGT-3'
3-1.1pr1	5'-TAAGAGCCGCGAGCGATCCT-3'

1007 bp XIAP 5'NCR

ACACGTGGGGCAACCCTGATTTATGCCTGTTGTCCAGTGTGATTACT
 5 AGTGTAATTTTTCACCTTTGAGAAGTGTCCAGGTTTGGAGGATAAATTATCT
 TTCTAATAATTGATACCCTTCTCATAACCTAACGGGTTCTTTTAGTATTTT
 ATCTGGGTAAAATTACCAGCTGTAATTTGGCAGCTCTAATAAGACTGCA
 GCAATACTTATCTCCATTTGAACAGATTGTTACTTGACCAAGGGAAGTTA
 ATAGCAAAAAGTAACTGCAGGGCACATGTATGTCATGGGCAAAAAAAAAA
 10 AAGTAACAGCAATTAAGGTTTGACAGTACTTAGAATTTTCTGAGCCACC
 CTCTAGAGGGCAGTGTACATATATATCTGTAATTATCCAGTTACAACAAA
 AAAAGGGCTCTCATTTCATGCATGAAAATCAGAAATATTTCACTCTTAA
 AGAACACATTTGGAACCAATATTATGATTA AAAACATATTTGCTAAGCAAA
 GAGATATTA AAAATTAATTCATTAACATTCTGAACATTTTAACTTGFAA
 15 AAACAACCTTIGATGCCTTGAATATATAATGATTCATTATAACAATTATGCA
 TAGATTTTAATAATCTGCATATTTTATGCTTTCATGTTTTTCTAATTAATG
 ATTTGACATGGTTAATAATTATAATATATTCTGCATCACAGTTTACATATT
 TATGTA AAAATAAGCATTAAAAATTATTAGTTTTATTCTGCCTGCTTAAAT
 ATTACTTCTCAAAAAGAGAAAACAAAATGCTAGATTTTACTTTATGAC
 20 TTGAATGATGTGGTAATGTGCAACTCTAGTATTTAGAATTAGAATGTTTCT
 TAGCGGTCGTGAGTTATTTTATGTCATAAGTGGATAATTGTTAGCTCC
 TATAACAAAAGTCTGTTGCTTGTGTTTCACATTTTGGATTTCTAATATAAT
 GTTCTCTTTT TAGAAAAGGTGGACAAGTCTATTTTCAAGAGAAGAT

Example 2. Construction of improved replicon vectors.A. Constructs containing the EMCV IRES

5

To demonstrate the functionality of an IRES sequence placed downstream of a functional alphavirus 26S promoter, reporter genes were subcloned into the pCDNA3.3/EMCV transfer vector and then the EMCV/reporter gene cassette was moved into the pERK replicon vector. Initial experiments were conducted using a replicon vector expressing the Chloramphenicol acetyl transferase (CAT) reporter gene. The CAT gene was amplified using primers F³-CAT (BamHI) and R³-CAT (XbaI) (Table 1). The PCR product was digested with BamHI and XbaI restriction enzymes and ligated into BamHI/XbaI linearized pCDNA3.3/EMCV DNA, generating pCDNA3.3/EMCV/CAT. After the sequence of the CAT gene was confirmed, pCDNA3.3/EMCV/CAT DNA was digested with AscI restriction enzyme to release a 1303 bp EMCV/CAT fragment. The AscI digested EMCV/CAT fragment was then ligated into AscI linearized pERK vector DNA, generating pERK/EMCV/CAT.

20

It has been shown that the EMCV IRES has a directional activity and when it is in the wrong orientation, with regard to a NOI, no cap-independent translation is noted (Roberts and Belsham (1997) *Virology* 227:53-62). In addition, deletion of the 5' terminal sequences of the EMCV IRES abolishes cap-independent translation in the context of a dicistronic expression vector (Van der Velden et al. (1995) *Virology* 214: 82-90; Jang & Wimmer (1990) *Genes & Development* 4:1560-72). To demonstrate that cap-independent translation of the CAT gene is occurring, two pERK vectors identical to pERK/EMCV/CAT were prepared, only with the EMCV IRES in the anti-sense orientation (pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT) or with a 5' deletion of the terminal sequences of the EMCV IRES (pERK/ΔAvr/CAT).

25

An anti-sense version of the EMCV IRES was PCR amplified from pKS rep2/EMCV DNA using primers anti-En(EcoRI) and anti-En(BamHI) (Table 1). The amplified EMCV IRES fragment was digested with EcoRI and BamHI restriction

enzymes and ligated into EcoRI/BamHI linearized pKS-rep2 DNA, generating pKS-rep2/anti-EMCV. The BamHI/XbaI digested CAT gene described above, was ligated into BamHI/XbaI linearized pKS-rep2/anti-EMCV DNA, generating pKS-rep2/anti-EMCV/CAT. The 1295 bp anti-EMCV/CAT gene cassette was PCR amplified from
5 pKS-rep2/anti-EMCV/CAT DNA using primers EMCVR(AscI).1 and anti-En(AscI) (Table 1). Finally, the anti-EMCV/CAT fragment was digested with AscI restriction enzyme and ligated into AscI linearized pERK vector DNA, generating pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT. The sequence of the anti-EMCV/CAT gene region was confirmed before further experiments were carried out.

10

To generate the Δ Avr/CAT pERK vector, first the Δ Avr deletion was made in the EMCV IRES found in pKS-rep2/EMCV intermediate vector. The deletion was accomplished by digesting pKS-rep2/EMCV DNA with both EcoRI and AvrII restriction enzymes deleting 145 bp from the 5' region of the EMCV IRES. The
15 linearized DNA was treated with T4 DNA polymerase to create blunt ends and religated to generate pKS-rep2/ Δ Avr DNA. The CAT gene was cloned into the intermediate vector by ligating the BamHI/XbaI CAT gene described above into BamHI and XbaI restriction enzyme linearized pKS-rep2/ Δ Avr, generating pKS-rep2/ Δ Avr/CAT DNA. The 1177 bp Δ Avr/CAT gene cassette was PCR amplified
20 from pKS-rep2/ Δ Avr/CAT. DNA using primers EMCVR(AscI).1 and Δ Avr En(AscI) R (Table 1). Finally, the Δ Avr/CAT fragment was digested with AscI restriction enzyme and ligated into AscI linearized pERK vector DNA, generating pERK/ Δ Avr/CAT. The sequence of the Δ Avr/CAT gene region was confirmed before further experiments were carried out.

25

B. Constructs containing the EV71 IRES

The human enterovirus 71 (EV71) IRES element (Thompson and Sarnow (2003) *Virology* 315: 259-266) was cloned in both sense and antisense orientations
30 into spacer replicon vectors and analyzed for expression of a CAT reporter gene. The EV71 IRES element (strain 7423/MS/87) was PCR amplified from pdc/MS DNA (Thompson and Sarnow, 2003) using primers to produce a sense fragment (dc/MS (EcoRI) F and dc/MS (BamHI) R) and an antisense fragment (dc/anti-MS (EcoRI) R

and dc/anti-MS (BamHI) F) (Table 3). The sense and antisense EV71-MS IRES PCR products were digested with EcoRI and BamHI restriction enzymes and ligated into pCDNA3.3 (see Example 1) linearized with EcoRI and BamHI, generating pCDNA3.3/MS and pCDNA3.3/anti-MS. The EV71-MS IRES regions, in each pCDNA3.3 vectors, were sequenced to verify that no nucleotide changes were introduced during PCR amplification before further experiments were initiated.

The CAT reporter gene, as described above in A., was cloned into BamHI and XbaI linearized pCDNA3.3/MS and pCDNA3.3/anti-MS vectors, generating pCDNA3.3/MS/CAT and pCDNA3.3/anti-MS/CAT, respectively. Spacer replicon constructs were produced by digesting the pCDNA3.3/MS/CAT and pCDNA3.3/anti-MS/CAT DNAs with AscI restriction enzyme and ligating the MS-CAT or anti-MS-CAT AscI fragments into spacer replicon vectors. The spacer-IRES-CAT region of each vector, was sequenced to verify that no nucleotide changes were introduced during cloning before further experiments were initiated.

Table 3

Primer	Sequence 5' – 3'
dc/MS(EcoRI) F	CGAATTCTTAAAACAGCTGTGGGTTG
dc/MS (BamHI) R	CGGGATCCGGTCAACTGTATTGAGGGTTAATATAAAG
dc/anti-MS(BamHI) F	CGGGATCCTTAAAACAGCTGTGGGTTGTTCCCAC
dc/anti-MS(EcoRI) R	GGAATTCGGTCAACTGTATTGAGGGTTAATATAAAG

C. Constructs containing the XIAP IRES

20

The CAT gene was cloned into the EcoRV and BamHI sites of pKS-rep2/XIAP1007 (see Example 4 below) after PCR amplification of the gene using CATF (5'-GGAGAAAAAATCACTGGATATAC-3') and CATR(Bam) (5'-GGGGATCCTTACGCCCGCCCTGCCAC-3') primers, generating pKS-rep2/XIAP/CAT 1007. This strategy reconstitutes the wild-type XIAP gene start site. The intermediate was then cloned as an ApaI/SphI fragment into pERK to generate

25

pERK/XIAP/CAT 1007. Following *in vitro* transcription and electroporation into Vero cells, VRP yields and CAT protein expression in infected cells were determined and compared to pERK/EMCV/CAT 342. VRP yields were equivalent for both constructs. In this particular construct, it has been possible to modify the level of
5 CAT protein expression using the XIAP IRES (3.97 e5 ng/ μ g) as compared with the EMCV IRES (1.08 e6 ng/ μ g), thus demonstrating the utility of different IRESs in the claimed invention.

D. Constructs expressing HIVgp160

10 A replicon expressing the HIVgp160 clade C gene was constructed in which translation of the HIVgp160 was directed from the EMCV IRES. In this construct, the 167 bp spacer from the pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap helper construct (see Example 4.B.1.) was cloned into an EMCV IRES replicon construct as follows. The pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap DNA was digested with ApaI restriction enzyme to release a
15 194 bp fragment containing the 167 bp spacer and a portion of the EMCV IRES. A pERK/EMCV 749 vector was also digested with ApaI restriction enzyme and the released 749 bp spacer ApaI fragment was replaced with the 167 bp spacer ApaI fragment, generating the pERK/EMCV 167 vector. To demonstrate that a heterologous gene could also be efficiently expressed and packaged from the
20 pERK/EMCV 167 replicon vector, the HIV clade C gp160 gene (Williamson C et al. (2003) AIDS Res Hum Retroviruses 19:133-44) was cloned into this vector as follows. The HIV gp160 gene was amplified (using primers env-5'-XbaI and DU151gp160 3'-XbaI) (Table 4) and cloned into pCR-XL-TOPO (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA), generating pCR-XL-TOPO/gp160. The gp160 gene was sequenced to
25 ensure no errors were introduced during PCR amplification before initiating further studies. The pCR-XL-TOPO/gp160 DNA was digested with XbaI restriction enzyme and the gp160 fragment was then ligated into XbaI linearized pCDNA3.3/EMCV, generating pCDNA3.3/EMCV/gp160. The pCDNA3.3/EMCV/gp160 DNA was digested with AscI restriction enzyme to release the EMCV/gp160 fragment. The
30 EMCV/gp160 fragment was then ligated into AscI linearized pERK/EMCV 167 vector DNA, generating the pERK/EMCV/gp160 167 vector.

Table 4

Primer	Sequence 5'-3'
Env-5'-XbaI	CGACATAGTCTAGACCGCCAAGATGAGAGTGATGG
DU151gp160 3'-XbaI	GATCTCTAGATTATTGCAAAGCTGCTTCAAAGCCC

E. Construction of double subgenomic IRES replicons expressing multiple NOIs

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An IRES replicon vector coding for two 26S-spacer-IRES-NOI cassettes in series was constructed. The base pERK vector used to generate the double subgenomic IRES replicons (pERK MCS2) contained a 342 bp spacer region downstream of the 26S promoter and coded for the following restriction sites in its MCS (5' AscI, SnaBI, 10 SphI 3').

The C-terminal portion of the heavy chain (Hc) of botulinum neurotoxins A and B (BoNT A and BoNT B) was cloned into pCDNA3.3/EMCV as BamHI/XbaI fragments, generating pCDNA3.3/EMCV/BoNT A and pCDNA3.3/EMCV/BoNT B, 15 respectively. The BoNT genes were digested out of the pCDNA3.3/EMCV vectors with AscI restriction enzyme and the AscI EMCV/BoNT cassettes were ligated into AscI linearized pERK MCS2 DNA, generating pERK/BoNT A MCS2 and pERK/BoNT B MCS2 monovalent vectors. Orientation of the insert was determined by restriction analysis and clones with inserts in the sense orientation were isolated. 20 The EMCV IRES and BoNT genes were sequenced to verify that no errors were introduced during cloning before further experiments were initiated.

To generate the double subgenomic BoNT A/B IRES replicon construct (pERK-BoNT A/B MCS2) the monovalent pERK BoNT MCS 2 vectors were utilized. The 25 pERK/BoNT B MCS2 vector was partially digested with PspOM I restriction enzyme and the ends were made blunt using T4 DNA polymerase. The pERK/BoNT B MCS2 DNA was further digested with SphI restriction enzyme to release a 26S-342bp spacer-EMCV-BoNT B fragment. The 26S-342 bp spacer-EMCV-BoNT B fragment was then ligated into SnaBI/SphI digested pERK/BoNT A MCS2 DNA, generating 30 the pERK-BoNT A/B MCS2 vector. The final structure of the construct is 5' NCR-nsp1,2,3,4 - 26S- 342bp spacer-EMCV-BoNT A-26S-342 bp spacer-EMCV-BoNT

B-NCR 3'. The sequence of the double subgenomic IRES replicon was verified before expression and VRP packaging studies were conducted.

F. Construction of an IRES-containing S.A. AR86 replicon

5

A replicon vector derived from S.A.AR86 (pRep89; described in Heise et al. *J Virol.* 2003 77(2):1149-56) was modified to contain a 342 bp spacer-EMCV-HIV gag cassette downstream of the 26S promoter. The 342bp spacer-EMCV-HIV gag fragment was PCR amplified from pERK/EMCV/gag 342 DNA using primer stuffer 342 (ClaI) and 3-42.pr4 (Table 5). Amplification with the 3-42.pr4 primer allows incorporation of 3' ClaI site that exists just downstream from the HIV gag gene in the pERK/EMCV/gag 342 DNA. The PCR product was then digested with ClaI restriction enzyme and ligated into ClaI linearized pRep89, generating the pRep89/EMCV/gag 342 vector. The entire inserted region was sequenced to ensure that no errors had been introduced during PCR amplification.

Table 5.

Primer	Sequence 5' – 3'
stuffer 342 (ClaI)	CCATCGATCTATTCCAGAAGTAGTGAGG
3-42.pr4	CAATCGCCGCGAGTTCTATG

Example 3. NOI expression analysis from IRES-directed replicons

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A. EMCV IRES replicon expression

1: CAT Expression

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CAT protein expression was examined using the pERK/EMCV/CAT, pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT, and pERK/ΔAvr/CAT replicon constructs. Capped replicon RNAs were *in vitro* transcribed using a T7 RiboMax kit (Promega Corporation; Madison, WI; Cat No. P1300). RNAs were purified using RNeasy purification columns (Qiagen Corporation, Germantown, MD) following the manufacturers instructions. Vero cells (6×10^6 cells) suspended in 0.4 ml InVirus™ chemically defined cell culture medium, (Cell Culture Technologies GmbH, Zurich, CH; Catalog No. IVT) and electroporated with 15 μg of either pERK/EMCV/CAT or pERK/anti-

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EMCV/CAT RNA using a Bio Rad Gene Pulser (BioRad Laboratories, Hercules, CA). Cells were pulsed four times with the electroporator set at 290 volts and 25 microfarads. CAT expression was detected by IFA using a rabbit anti-CAT antibody on methanol fixed cells and by ELISA using electroporated cell lysates and a
 5 commercially available CAT ELISA kit (Boehringer Mannheim, Indianapolis, IN).

Random DNA fragments were cloned between the EMCV IRES sequence and the VEE subgenomic promoter at a unique EcoRV site located in the pERK vectors. The small DNA fragments cloned between the 26S promoter and the EMCV IRES
 10 came from AluI restriction enzyme digested pCDNA3.1(-) DNA. The AluI restriction enzyme cuts frequently within pCDNA3.1(-) DNA resulting in blunt end fragments ranging in size from 706 bp to 6 bp. The AluI digested pCDNA3.1(-) fragments were ligated into EcoRV linearized pERK/EMCV/CAT, pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT, and pERK/ Δ Avr/CAT DNAs. Individual clones were sequenced to determine what spacer
 15 fragment had been cloned into each new vector. The size of some of the spacer fragments found in the vectors was larger than the largest predicted pCDNA3.1(-) AluI fragment, due to ligation of multiple fragments into the spacer region of these replicons. Each spacer-IRES replicon was transcribed and the RNA electroporated into Vero cells as described above. CAT protein expression was monitored by CAT
 20 ELISA and the results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. CAT expression analysis from EMCV-IRES containing replicons

Replicon	size of spacer fragment	ng CAT/ μ g total protein
pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT	133	2.1
pERK/EMCV/CAT	234	9.9
pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT	234	1.5
pERK/ Δ Avr/CAT	234	0.4
pERK/ Δ Avr/CAT	226	0.5
pERK/EMCV/CAT	342	10.3
pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT	357	0.1
pERK/EMCV/CAT	805	7.4
pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT	706	0.5
pERK/ Δ Avr/CAT	681	0.02

The results indicate that CAT expression from pERK/IRES/CAT replicon constructs containing spacer fragments is robust and directed by the IRES, as compared with similar vectors with no spacer fragments (approximately 4-7 ng CAT/ μ g total protein). The highest levels of expression of the heterologous gene occurred when spacer fragments greater than approximately 200 nucleotides were introduced between the 26S promoter and the EMCV IRES sequences.

2. Multiple NOI expression from a single replicon

Expression and packaging of the pERK-BoNT A/B MCS2 replicon were carried out in Vero cells. Capped pERK-BoNT A/B replicon RNA was transcribed and purified as described above. Vero cells (1×10^8 cells) were electroporated with 30 μ g of replicon RNA, 30 μ g of capsid helper RNA and 30 μ g of glycoprotein helper RNA. Electroporated cells were analyzed by IFA using horse anti-BoNT A and BoNT B antibodies (Perimmune, Rockville, MD) before VRP were harvested. Results of the IFA and titration of VRP generated are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Replicon	Anti-BoNT A IFA	Anti-BoNT B IFA	VRP titer
pERK-BoNT A/B MCS2	Positive	Positive	2×10^9 VRP

3. HIV gp160 Expression

The pERK/EMCV/gp160 167 replicon (Example 2D) was analyzed for expression of the gp160 gene and VRP generation. Purified RNA was prepared for the replicon, GP helper and capsid helper as described above. Vero cells were electroporated with the RNAs and VRP were collected 20 – 24 hours post electroporation. Results of IFA and VRP titration are summarized in Table 8. For comparison, a pERK replicon expressing gp160 directly from the 26S promoter was also evaluated.

Table 8.

Replicon	Anti-gp160 IFA	VRP titer/ml
pERK/gp160	Positive	2.1×10^8
pERK/EMCV/gp160 167	Positive	2.5×10^8

4. HIV GAG expression from a S.A. AR86 Replicon

- 5 pRep89/EMCV/gag 342 DNA was transcribed *in vitro*, using an SP6 RiboMax kit (Promega Corporation; Madison, WI; Cat No. P1280), to generate capped replicon RNA. RNA was purified using RNeasy purification columns (Qiagen Corporation, Germantown, MD) following the manufacturers' instructions. Vero cells (1×10^8 cells) were electroporated with 30 ug of Rep89/EMCV/gag 342 RNA and then
- 10 analyzed for Gag protein expression ~ 18 hr post electroporation. Anti-Gag IFA analysis of Rep89/EMCV/gag 342 electroporated cells was positive for Gag protein expression

B. EV71-MS IRES replicon expression

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Expression of CAT protein from each EV71-MS containing replicon was carried out in Vero cells. Capped replicon RNA was transcribed and purified as described above. Vero cells ($2-3 \times 10^7$ cells) were electroporated with 30 μ g of replicon RNA. Electroporated cells were analyzed by IFA using anti-CAT (Cortex Biochem, San

20 Leandro, CA) and anti-VEE nsp2 antibodies (AlphaVax) approximately 18 hours post electroporation. In addition, CAT expression was monitored by ELISA as described above. Results of IFA and CAT ELISA comparing activity detected from pERK/EMCV/CAT 342 and pERK/MS/CAT 342 replicons are shown in Table 9.

25 Table 9.

Replicon	Anti CAT IFA	Anti VEE nsp2 IFA	ng CAT/ μ g protein	% reduction in translation
pERK/MS/CAT 342	+	+	20.1	NA
pERK/anti-MS/CAT 342	-	+	0.6	97%

pERK/EMCV/CAT 342	+	+	14.8	NA
pERK/ Δ A _{vtr} /CAT 342	-	+	0.0	>99%

Example 4. IRES-directed translation with different spacers

A. Replicon Constructs

5

1. EMCV IRES-containing constructs

10 Pairs of replicon constructs coding for either the EMCV or antisense-EMCV IRES sequences were prepared that contained exactly the same spacer region. These comparisons demonstrate that only the EMCV IRES sequences in the sense-orientation (i.e. in the 5'-3' orientation in which the sequence is found in the virus) direct cap-independent translation; that is, very little translation occurs when the IRES is in an anti-sense orientation, indicating that a properly-oriented IRES element is required to obtain significant CAT expression in these constructs. These replicon
15 constructs were prepared as described above. Each spacer-IRES replicon was *in vitro* transcribed and 30 μ g of each purified RNA was electroporated into $\sim 1 \times 10^7$ Vero cells as described above. CAT protein expression was monitored by CAT ELISA and the results are summarized in Table 10.

20 Table 10. Comparison of CAT expression using spacer-EMCV or spacer-anti-EMCV IRES replicons.

replicon	size of spacer fragment	ng CAT/ μ g total protein	replicon	size of spacer fragment	ng CAT/ μ g total protein	% reduction in translation*	Fold increase in translation [†]
EMCV/CAT	257	16.9	Anti-EMCV/CAT	257	3.1	82.7	5.5
EMCV/CAT	342	35.6	Anti-EMCV/CAT	342	0.2	99.4	178
EMCV/CAT	357	7.6	Anti-EMCV/CAT	357	0.4	94.7	19
EMCV/CAT	383	28.7	Anti-	383	0.6	97.9	48

			EMCV/CAT				
EMCV/CAT	579	40.0	Anti-EMCV/CAT	579	0.3	99.2	133
EMCV/CAT	749	6.74	Anti-EMCV/CAT	749	0.03	99.5	224

*% reduction in translation in the anti-sense oriented IRES constructs relative to the sense-oriented, IRES directed constructs

[#]Fold increase in translation from the sense oriented IRES element relative to translation from constructs with an anti-sense oriented IRES element

5

The data show that CAT protein expression was greatly reduced (in most cases >95%) when the replicon contained a spacer and an anti-sense EMCV IRES upstream of the CAT gene. Furthermore, the data demonstrate the capability of an IRES-

10 directed protein expression system to optimize the level of expression of NOI. The optimization is NOI-specific, but utilizing the teachings herein, the identification of spacer-IRES combinations that provide the desired level of expression for any given NOI would be routine to one of ordinary skill in the art.

15 2. Use of a spacer derived from a 5' non-coding region

A pERK replicon was engineered to contain the full-length VEE capsid protein gene by PCR amplifying the capsid sequence from pH500A/Vcap using the Cap5'1' and 3-1.1pr1 primers (Table 11). The resulting PCR product was inserted

20 into the EcoRV and SphI restriction enzyme sites of pERK. "pERK/Capsid," was modified further to contain a unique AscI restriction enzyme at the 3' end of the capsid gene using AscIF and AscIR primers (Table 11) for site-directed mutagenesis using a commercially available kit (Stratagene). Serial truncations of the VEE capsid sequence were then generated by PCR amplification of sequences from pERK/Capsid

25 using a forward primer (13-82.2.16) that anneals within the nsP4 gene and reverse primers (Table 11), that have been engineered to contain an AscI restriction enzyme site. PCR products were digested with ApaI and AscI or SmaI and AscI and cloned back into pERK/Capsid to generate pERK/Cap200, pERK/Cap400 and pERK/Cap600. These replicons retain increasing amounts of sequence from the 5'

30 end of the capsid gene to function as a "spacer" between the 26S promoter and the downstream constructs to be inserted. To introduce an EMCV/CAT cassette into each of the pERK/Cap vectors described above, pCDNA3.3/EMCV/CAT DNA was

digested with *AscI* restriction enzyme to release a 1303 bp EMCV/CAT fragment. The *AscI* digested EMCV/CAT fragment was then ligated into the *AscI* linearized pERK/Cap vector DNAs, generating pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap 200, pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap 400 and pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap600.

5

Table 11: Primers for generating capsid spacer replicons.

Cap5'F	5'-GTTCCCGTTCAGCCAATGTATCCG-3'
3-1.1pr1	5'-TAAGAGCCGCGAGCGATCCT-3'
AscIF	5'-CCGCGAGTTCTATGTAAGCGGCGGCCAATTGTTAC AGACACATGGTGG-3'
AscIR	5'-CCACCATGTGTCTGTAACAATTGGCGGCGCCTTACA TAGAACTCGCGG-3'
13-82.2.16	5'-GCTCTTTTTCGAAGACACATAAT-3'
CAP200(<i>AscI</i>)	5'- TTGGCGGCCTTCTTCGGTTTCTTAGCGGATGGCCC-3'
CAP400(<i>AscI</i>)	5'- TTGGCGGCCTTCCAACATGATTGGGAACG-3'
CAP600(<i>AscI</i>)	5'- TTGGCGGCCTGTAATAGCCTTGGGGTTTCTCATGGG- 3'

These replicons, containing portions of the 5' region of the VEE capsid gene, were linearized, *in vitro* transcribed, electroporated into Vero cells and analyzed for CAT protein expression by IFA and ELISA. CAT protein expression was verified by IFA using CAT-specific antibodies; however, the intensity of immunofluorescence varied depending on the length of the capsid gene spacer used. These results were reflected in the CAT ELISA (Table 12).

15 Table 12: Cat protein expression from replicons containing capsid gene spacers

Construct	CAT IFA	nsP2 IFA	CAT Protein
pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap 200	75%	95%	29 ng/ μ g total prot.
pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap 400	60%	95%	2 ng/ μ g total prot
pERK/EMCV/CAT Cap 600	60%	95%	5 ng/ μ g total prot.
pERK/EMCV/CAT 342	50%	50%	14 ng/ μ g total prot.

B. Helper Constructs

1. Constructs comprising the EMCV IRES

5 Helpers were constructed which individually expressed either the VEE glycoprotein genes ("GP") or the VEE capsid gene. Initially, two empty helper backbone vectors were generated to facilitate construction of spacer-IRES containing capsid and GP helpers. One empty helper was generated by digesting the pERK vector with ApaI and RsrII restriction enzymes to remove 6989 bp of the
10 nonstructural protein coding region. The DNA was treated with T4 DNA polymerase to produce blunt ends before ligating the nonstructural gene-deleted pERK vector to produce pH500G. The pH500G empty helper contained approximately 500 nucleotides of the 5' noncoding region (NCR). The second empty helper was generated by digesting the pERK vector with SmaI and RsrII restriction enzymes to
15 remove 6449 bp of the nonstructural protein coding region. The DNA was treated with T4 DNA polymerase to produce blunt ends before ligating the DNA, generating pH1500G. The pH1500G empty helper contained approximately 1500 nucleotides of the 5' NCR, including an additional 540 bp of the nsp4 gene immediately upstream of the 26S promoter that is not present in the pH500G helper. Empty helper constructs
20 were also prepared that coded for an A rather than a G residue at nucleotide 3 (pH500A and pH1500A). These constructs were prepared by subcloning the 5' NCR region from a capsid helper (pH500A/Vcap), which contains an A at nucleotide 3, in place of the same region in pH500G and pH1500G. This was accomplished by digesting pH500A/Vcap with XbaI and SacI restriction enzymes, collecting the 430
25 bp fragment and ligating it into XbaI and SacI digested pH500G and pH1500G DNAs, generating pH500A and pH1500A respectively.

 The capsid and GP genes were cloned into pCDNA3.3/EMCV and pKS-rep2/anti-EMCV as BamHI and XbaI fragments as described above. The
30 EMCV/capsid, anti-EMCV/capsid, EMCV/GP and anti-EMCV/GP cassettes were cloned into the pH500G, pH500A, pH1500G and pH1500A empty helper constructs as AscI fragments as described above. The sequence of each helper was confirmed before further experiments were initiated.

Random spacer fragments were cloned between the 26S promoter and the EMCV or anti-EMCV IRES in each helper at a unique EcoRV site as previously described. The sequence and length of the inserted spacer fragments was determined for each new helper, and the length of the spacer insert is included at the end of the construct designation. Spacers #15, 16, and 22 were not further characterized. The constructs pH500A/EMCV/GP and pH500A/anti-EMCV/GP contain no spacer.

2. Packaging and Titers using EMCV IRES-containing GP and/or Capsid Helper Combinations

Various combinations of the GP and Capsid helpers were used to package a VEE replicon expressing the HIV-GAG protein, pERK-342/EMCV/*gag* (see Example 7 for a description of the construction of this replicon). For the results presented in Table 13, 30 µg of each RNA helper and 30 µg of the replicon RNA were co-electroporated into Vero cells in a 0.8 ml electroporation cuvette, using 4 pulses at 580 V and 25 µF, and the cells were allowed to recover at room temperature for 10 min. Electroporated cells were seeded into T-175 flasks containing 50 ml EMEM (10% FBS) with antibiotics and incubated at 37°C. After 20-24 hours, VEE replicon particles ("VRPs") were collected and tittered on Vero cells in 96-well plates by measuring GAG protein expression using an immunofluorescence assay (IFA). The VRP yield (Table 13) from each electroporation is expressed on an "IU/ml" basis, for comparative purposes.

Table 13.

Capsid Helper	GP Helper	Yield of VRPs (IU/ml)
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 384	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	1.6 e6
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	1.32 e6
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	1.51 e6
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	1.92 e5
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP #15	2.35 e5
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP #16	5.55 e5
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP #22	1.15 e6

pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/EMCV/GP 291	2.22 e6
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/EMCV/GP 291	5.16 e6
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 291	1.75 e5
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/EMCV/GP	1.00 e7
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/EMCV/GP	6.20 e7
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 384	pH500A/EMCV/GP 376	2.99 e5
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/EMCV/GP 376	1.49 e5
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/EMCV/GP 376	1.71 e5
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 376	8.53 e4
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 384	pH500A/EMCV/GP 342	8.11 e5
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/EMCV/GP 342	8.32 e5
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/EMCV/GP 342	1.07 e6
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 342	1.92 e5
pH500A/EMCV/Vcap 291	pH500A/GP	3.56 e8
		1.00 e8
pH1500A/EMCV/Vcap 167	pH500A/GP	1.13 e8
		2.37 e7

In other experiments, the amount of GP Helper RNA was varied in the electroporation milieu; all other conditions for VRP production were as described above. The results are shown in Table 14.

5

Table 14.

Capsid Helper	GP Helper	μg GP RNA	VRP Yield (IU/ml)
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	45	1.51 e6
pH500A/Vcap	pH500A/EMCV/GP 393	60	2.24 e6

3. 26S-IRES GP Helpers without a Spacer

This experiment was performed to see whether a spacer was required in the GP Helper to uncouple transcription from translation. Vero cells were separately
5 electroporated with each of the following mixtures:

- a. Gag Replicon Vector (see Ex. 6) + pH500A/anti-EMCV/GP +
pH500A/anti-EMCV/Vcap 291
- b. Gag Replicon Vector + pH500A/EMCV/GP + pH500A/EMCV/Vcap
291

10 Cells were incubated as described previously to allow VRP production and the VRPs were harvested and titered on VERO cells by IFA. In the case of the helpers with the IRES in the sense orientation (the "b." mix), the VRP yield was 3.3×10^6 ; while in the case of the helpers in which the IRES is placed in the anti-sense orientation, the VRP yield was 5.3×10^2 .

15

4. Production and Use of VEE helper constructs containing the XIAP IRES

The VEE capsid ("VCap") and glycoprotein ("VGP") genes were PCR
20 amplified from pH500A/Vcap and pH500A/GP, respectively, using PFU pol (Stratagene; LaJolla, CA) and Cap5'F or 13-87pr1 forward primers and 3-1.1pr1 reverse primers (Table 2, see Example 1B). The resulting PCR products were cloned into the EcoRV and SphI sites of pKS-rep2. This strategy reconstitutes the VEE structural protein start codon at the wild-type start of the XIAP gene. The VEE structural protein sequence in each plasmid was verified by automated DNA
25 sequencing, and the resulting plasmids were used for *in vitro* transcription. RNA was purified using Qiagen RNeasy columns and electroporated into Vero cells for analysis of protein expression and packaging. All helpers expressed either VEE capsid or glycoproteins as determined by IFA, and titers recovered for a VEE replicon expressing the HIV GAG protein ranged from 1×10^5 to 1×10^7 total.

30

The XIAP1007-VEE structural protein construct described above was also cloned into a second helper plasmid, pH1500A, as an ApaI/SphI DNA fragment, generating pH1500A/XIAP/Vcap 1007 and pH1500A/XIAP/GP 1007. These plasmids were used to make RNA and electroporated into Vero cells as above to

analyzed protein expression and VRP packaging. Again, the resulting helpers expressed either the VEE capsid or glycoprotein as determined by IFA, and titers ranged from 1×10^8 to over 1×10^9 total VRP, demonstrating the gain from the transcription of the subgenomic mRNA from the 26S promoter.

5

Example 5.

Northern analysis was carried out on total cellular RNA collected from Vero cells into which replicon RNAs were electroporated. Spacer-IRES replicon constructs were *in vitro* transcribed and 30 μ g of RNeasy column-purified RNA was electroporated into approximately 1×10^7 Vero cells, as described above. The electroporated cells were resuspended in 10 ml of DMEM media, then 7 ml (approximately 7×10^6 cells) were seeded into one 25 cm^2 flask. Total cellular RNA was collected from the cells 16 hr post electroporation using an RNeasy extraction kit (Ambion) following the manufacturers' instructions. The RNAs were quantified and 10 μ g of each were run on a 1% glyoxal agarose gel before being transferred to a Brightstar-Plus membrane (Ambion) by passive transfer. The RNAs were UV crosslinked to the membrane, blocked with UltraHyb (Ambion) solution for 1 hr at 45°C, and probed overnight with UltraHyb solution containing a biotinylated anti-sense primer (3' UTR4Xbiotin, Table 1) specific for the 3' UTR of the VEE subgenomic RNA (Integrated DNA Technologies, Coralville, IA) 45°C. After overnight hybridization the blot was processed by chemiluminescent RNA detection using a Brightstar Biodetect kit (Ambion) following the manufacturers instructions and visualization with a Epi Chemi II Darkroom (UVP, Inc., Upland, CA). Results of Northern analysis of RNA from Vero cells electroporated with pERK/EMCV/CAT 257, pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT 257, pERK/EMCV/CAT 579, or pERK/anti-EMCV/CAT 579 is shown in Figure 1. Both the EMCV and anti-EMCV replicon constructs produced subgenomic transcripts of nearly equal intensity, indicating that the lack of expression of CAT protein from spacer-anti-EMCV/CAT replicon constructs was not due to any substantive reduction in subgenomic RNAs.

Example 6. Construction of an HIV_{gag} gene IRES-directed replicon vector

An HIV subtype C gag gene was cloned into the pERK/EMCV vector containing a 342 bp spacer (pERK-342), as described above. The gag gene was PCR amplified from pERK/HIV_{gag} DNA using primers GAG-F and GAG-R (Table 1). The primers were engineered to contain BamHI restriction sites such that the PCR product would code for this site at the 5' and 3' ends. The PCR product was digested with BamHI restriction enzyme and ligated into BamHI linearized pCDNA3.3/EMCV DNA. Orientation of the gag gene was determined by restriction analysis and a construct with the gene in the correct orientation was selected, generating pCDNA3.3/EMCV/gag. The EMCV/gag gene cassette was digested from pCDNA3.3/EMCV/gag DNA with AscI restriction enzyme and ligated into AscI linearized pERK-342 DNA. Orientation of the EMCV/gag gene cassette was determined by restriction analysis and a construct with the gene in the correct orientation was selected, generating pERK-342/EMCV/gag. The sequence of the EMCV/gag region was verified before further experiments were initiated.

Analysis of gag protein expression, by IFA and Western blot, indicated that the protein expressed under the direction of the IRES in the pERK-342/EMCV/gag replicon is indistinguishable from the protein expressed from a pERK/HIV_{gag} replicon in which both translation and transcription are directed by the 26S VEE subgenomic promoter. In addition, the level of expression, as measured by titrating VRP, was increased with the IRES-directed system as compared to the 26S promoter-directed system (Table 15).

Table 15. Comparison of VRP titers generated with different replicon vectors

Replicon vector	VRP titer
pERK/HIV _{gag}	4.0×10^8 IFU
pERK-342/EMCV/gag	5.3×10^8 IFU

Example 7. Humoral and cellular immune responses in mice inoculated with IRES-directed HIVgag replicon particles.

The pERK/EMCV/gag 342 replicon elicits robust humoral and cellular responses when vaccinated into animals. Four-to-five week-old female BALB/c mice were obtained from Charles River and were acclimatized for one week prior to any procedure. For the prime and boost, groups of mice were inoculated in both rear footpads under isofluorane anesthesia with a target dose of 5×10^5 IFU of VRP in diluent containing PBS with 1% v/v human serum albumin and 5% w/v sucrose. Footpad injections were performed with a 30.5 G needle and a 0.100 mL Hamilton syringe by injecting 20 μ L in each hind footpad. Serum samples were obtained by retro-orbital bleeding under isofluorane anesthesia before the first inoculation on Day 0 (pre-bleed), Day 21 (20 days after the primary inoculation) and Day 29 (7 days after the boost). The vaccination schedule is summarized in Table 16. Spleens were harvested 14 days after boost for IFN- γ ELISPOT assays

Table 16. IRES-directed replicon VRP vaccination schedule

Group	N	Mouse strain	VRP Vaccine	Dose, IFU	Route	Inoculation Day	Serum Sampling Day
1	5	BALB/c	EMCV/Gag 342 ²	5×10^5	sc-fp ⁴	Day 1 & 22	Day 0, 21, 29
2	5	BALB/c	EMCV/Gag 342 ²	5×10^6	sc-fp ⁴	Day 1 & 22	Day 0, 21, 29
3	5	BALB/c	Control.VRP ³	5×10^5	sc-fp ⁴	Day 1 & 22	Day 0, 21, 29

- 1: GMP manufactured Gag VRP prepared with un-modified pERK replicon vector
- 2: 342 refers to the number of nucleotides in the spacer upstream of the IRES/Gag cassette.
- 3: Control VRP consist of replicons expressing an HIV Pol/Nef gene.
- 4: sc-fp refers to subcutaneous footpad.

A. Immunologic assays performed after vaccination

Gag ELISA: Purified recombinant histidine-tagged (his)-p55 from HIV-1 subtype C isolate DU-422 was used as antigen coat. Sera were evaluated for the presence of Gag-specific antibodies by a standard indirect ELISA.

Gag ELISPOT Assay : Viable lymphocytes harvested from spleens were seeded into individual ELISPOT assay wells in a Multiscreen Immobilon-P ELISPOT

plate (ELISPOT certified 96-well filtration plate, Millipore, Bedford, MA) that had been pre-coated with an anti-IFN- γ monoclonal antibody AN18 (rat IgG1, MabTech, Mariemont, OH), and incubated for 16-20 hours. Cells were removed by multiple washes with buffer and the wells were incubated with a biotinylated anti-IFN- γ monoclonal antibody R4-6A2 (rat IgG1, MabTech), followed by washing and incubation with Avidin-Peroxidase-Complex (Vectastain ABC Peroxidase Kit, Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA). To allow for the complex to form, the Avidin-Peroxidase Complex was prepared at least 30 minutes before completion of the incubation period with the secondary antibody and was stored at room temperature. Following incubation, the wells were washed and incubated for 4 minutes at room temperature with substrate (AEC tablets, Sigma) to facilitate formation of spots, which represent the positions of the individual IFN- γ -secreting cells during culture. Spot development was stopped by distilled water rinse.

To enumerate Gag-specific IFN- γ secreting cells in lymphocytes from mice immunized with HIV_{gag} VRP, lymphocytes were stimulated with the immunodominant CD8+ CTL H-2K^d-restricted HIV-Gag peptide AMQMLKETI or an irrelevant HA (influenza hemagglutinin) CD8+ CTL H-2K^d-restricted peptide IYSTVASSL that binds to MHC Class I, for 16-20 hours (5% CO₂ at 37°C). Cells minus peptide serve as a background control. As a positive control, cells were stimulated with 4 μ g/mL Concanavalin A for a similar time period. Peptides were synthesized with free ends and purified to >90% by New England Peptide.

HIV_{gag} VRP Potency Titration: A Gag-specific IFA of HIV_{gag} VRP infected Vero cells was used to measure the potency or infectious titer of the vaccines. Potency is measured as infectious units per mL, IFU/mL. On the day of each injection residual inocula were back-titrated to determine the actual dose each animal received (Table 17).

Table 17. Summary of Gag ELISA and ELISPOT results

Mouse #	HIV VRP Vaccine	Inoculations Dose (FU)		Gag Ab Titers			ELISPOT ¹ (SFC/1e6 lymphocytes) 14 Days Post Boost Day 36
		Prime Day 1	Boost Day 22	Pre-bloed Day -1	7 Days Post Boost Day 29	GMT ²	
1-1	EMCV/gag 342	6.8e5	4.4e5	<40	20480	23525	341
1-2				<40	40960		
1-3				<40	20480		
1-4				<40	20480		
1-5				<40	20480		
2-1	EMCV/gag 342	1.2e6	5.6e5	<40	5120	13512	438
2-2				<40	10240		
2-3				<40	10240		
2-4				<40	20480		
2-5				<40	40960		
3-1	control VRP	2.6e5	2.2e5	<40	<40		7
3-2				<40	<40		
3-3				<40	<40		
3-4				<40	≥ 40 (OD=0.32)		
3-5				<40	≥ 40 (OD=0.32)		

1: SFC/1e6 lymphocytes refers to spot forming cells per 1×10^6 lymphocytes
 2: GMT, geometric mean titer

5

Results of the vaccination study indicate that the 342/EMCV/gag VRP vaccinated animals mounted a robust humoral and cellular immune response to HIV-Gag, as measured by anti-Gag antibody ELISA and Gag specific ELISPOT assays.

10 **Example 8.**

The activity of several insect virus IRES sequences was compared to the activity of a mammalian-virus IRES (EMCV) in a number of insect cell lines. Replicon vectors were designed such that the 26S subgenomic transcript would be bi-cistronic.

15 The 26S subgenomic RNA is capped, meaning that translation of the first gene on the bi-cistronic RNA (Chloramphenicol acetyl transferase (CAT)) is cap-dependent while translation of the second gene (Luciferase (LUC)) is dependent on the IRES sequence (cap-independent). Sindbis virus-based replicon vectors were engineered to contain the following elements: 5'NCR, nsp1,2,3,4, 26S promoter, CAT gene, IRES, LUC
 20 gene, NCR 3'. Two insect virus IRES sequences, one derived from *Acyrtosiphon*

pisum virus (APV) and the other from *Rhopalosiphum padi* virus (RhPV), were engineered between the CAT and LUC genes. For comparison, a mammalian virus IRES (EMCV) was engineered between the CAT and LUC genes into the same Sindbis replicon vector. RNA for each replicon construct and an RNA helper that

5 coded for all of the Sindbis structural protein genes (capsid-E3-E2-6K-E1) were transcribed *in vitro* using SP6 RNA polymerase. Sindbis replicon particles were prepared by electroporating helper RNA and each of the bi-cistronic replicon RNAs into 8×10^6 BHK-21 cells. The media was collected, clarified, and replicon particles were purified by centrifugation through a 20% sucrose cushion (24,000 RPM for 3 hr

10 at 4°C). Replicon particles were titrated using a rabbit anti-CAT antibody (Cortex Biochem, San Leandro, CA).

To determine the activity of the insect virus IRES sequences in comparison to the EMCV IRES, the purified Sindbis replicon bi-cistronic particles were used to

15 infect a number of different insect cells growing in culture. Insect cells used in these experiments were: *Toxorhynchites amboinensis*, *Anopheles albimanus*, *Anopheles gambiae*, and *Aedes albopictus*. Insect cells were infected at an MOI of 0.1 with replicon bi-cistronic particles. Approximately 16 hr post infection cell lysates were prepared and the amount of CAT protein present in the lysates was determined using a

20 CAT ELISA kit (Roche, Indianapolis IN) following the manufacturers instructions. In parallel, the amount of LUC protein present in the lysates was determined using a luciferase assay kit (Roche). The amount of CAT and LUC detected in each lysate was normalized for the quantity of protein used in each assay to allow comparison of the two values (Table 17). The CAT protein detected in each cell type was similar

25 regardless of the replicon used. This data indicates that similar infection efficiencies were attained within a cell type for each of the three IRES containing replicon particles, and thus the LUC activity detected in each cell type directly reflects the activity of the IRES sequence in that cell type. In each of the insect cell types analyzed, the insect-virus IRES had more activity (85-95% more) than the EMCV

30 IRES (Table 17).

Table 17. Comparison of insect-virus IRES (APV or RhPV) activity and mammalian-virus IRES (EMCV) activity in different insect cell types.

Insect cell type	IRES analyzed	ng CAT/ μ g protein	LUC activity (RLU)/ μ g protein	% difference from EMCV
<i>Tox. amboinensis</i>	APV	2.0	290.5	88%
<i>Tox. amboinensis</i>	RhPV	2.1	231.4	85%
<i>Tox. amboinensis</i>	EMCV	1.6	33.1	0%
<i>An. Albimanus</i>	APV	2.9	497.7	93%
<i>An. Albimanus</i>	RhPV	2.0	468.6	93%
<i>An. Albimanus</i>	EMCV	2.3	31.8	0%
<i>An. gambiae</i>	APV	1.8	525.7	95%
<i>An. gambiae</i>	RhPV	1.7	283.6	91%
<i>An. gambiae</i>	EMCV	1.8	24.2	0%
<i>Ae. albopictus</i>	APV	4.8	87.3	93%
<i>Ae. albopictus</i>	RhPV	4.1	119	95%
<i>Ae. albopictus</i>	EMCV	4.7	5.7	0%

Example 9. Humoral and cellular immune responses to an IRES replicon in primates

5

A study on the immunogenicity of the pERK/EMCV/gag 342 containing VRPs (Example 6) was also conducted in cynomolgus macaques at the Southern Research Institute in Frederick, MD. Each vaccine was administered to six animals by subcutaneous and intramuscular injection (three animals/route). Animals received

two inoculations of 1×10^8 vaccine particles at 0 and 1 month. Humoral immune responses were analyzed 4-weeks after the second inoculation (as described in Example 7A), and are presented in Table 18. For comparison, a VEE replicon expressing the gag protein directly from the 26S promoter (pERK/gag) was also evaluated.

10

Table 18.

Construct	Route	ELISA GMT
pERK/EMCV/gag 342	Subcutaneous	1613
pERK/EMCV/gag 342	Intramuscular	640
pERK/gag	Subcutaneous	403
pERK/gag	Intramuscular	1280

Although the present process has been described with reference to specific details of certain embodiments thereof, it is not intended that such details should be regarded as limitations upon the scope of the invention except as and to the extent that they are included in the accompanying claims.

5

Throughout this application, various patents, patent publication, journal publications and other publications are referenced. The disclosures of these publications in their entireties are incorporated by reference into this application in order to more fully describe the state of the art to which this invention pertains and to
10 provide written description for the subject matter of the sentence in which these references appear in this application.

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THE CLAIMS DEFINING THE INVENTION ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. A recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising:
 - 5 (a) a nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;
 - (b) a nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein;
 - (c) an alphavirus subgenomic promoter -IRES- heterologous nucleic acid of interest (NOI) cassette, which is in 5' to 3' orientation; and
 - 10 (d) a nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

2. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 1, wherein the alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette further comprises a spacer non-coding nucleic acid sequence located 3' to the alphavirus subgenomic promoter and 5' to
15 the IRES.

3. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the nucleic acid sequence of (b) is a contiguous nucleotide sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp1, nsp2, nsp3 and nsp4.
20

4. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the nucleic acid sequence of (b) is a contiguous nucleotide sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins nsp1, nsp2 and nsp3 and wherein the recombinant replicon nucleic acid further comprises a nucleotide sequence encoding alphavirus nonstructural
25 protein nsp4 that is not contiguous with the nucleic acid sequence of (b).

5. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the IRES is selected from the group consisting of cellular IRESs, plant IRESs, mammalian virus IRESs, synthetic IRESs and insect virus IRESs.
30

6. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the alphavirus subgenomic promoter of (c) is a minimal or modified alphavirus subgenomic promoter.

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7. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the heterologous NOI of (c) encodes a protein or peptide, an antisense sequence, or a ribozyme.

5

8. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 7 wherein the peptide is an immunogen.

9. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any preceding claim, further comprising a nucleotide sequence encoding an alphavirus structural protein.

10
15
11. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the nucleic acid sequence of (a), (b), (c), or (d) of any one of the preceding claims, or the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 9, wherein the alphavirus structural protein of claim 9, is from an alphavirus selected from the group consisting of Sindbis virus, Semliki Forest virus (SFV), Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus (VEE), South African arbovirus 86 (S.A. AR86) virus, Ross River virus, Eastern equine encephalitis virus (EEE) and Western equine encephalitis virus (WEE).

20
12. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one the preceding claims, wherein the IRES of (c) directs the translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous NOI of (c), such that at least 80% or at least 10% of the translation of the gene product encoded by the heterologous NOI is controlled by the activity of the IRES.

25

13. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the nucleic acid is RNA or DNA.

30
14. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 2, wherein the spacer non-coding nucleic acid sequence is at least 30 nucleotides in length, or is between 25 and 7500 nucleotides in length, or is between 150 and 1000 nucleotides in length.

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14. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims comprising an attenuating mutation.

15. A recombinant replicon nucleic acid comprising:

- 5 (a) a nucleic acid sequence encoding a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;
- (b) a nucleic acid sequence encoding an alphavirus nonstructural protein;
- (c) a first alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation;
- 10 (d) a second alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation; and
- (e) a nucleic acid encoding a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

16. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of claim 15, wherein the first and
15 second alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassettes further comprise a spacer non-coding nucleic acid sequence located 3' to the alphavirus subgenomic promoter and 5' to the IRES.

17. The recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding
20 claims, further comprising an alphavirus packaging signal.

18. A population of infectious, defective, alphavirus particles, wherein at
least one particle comprises the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims.

25

19. The population of infectious, defective, alphavirus particles of claim 18, wherein the population has no detectable replication-competent virus, as measured by passage on cell culture.

20. A pharmaceutical composition comprising the population of claim 18 or
30 claim 19 in a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

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21. An alphavirus particle comprising a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to any one of claims 1 to 17.

22. A recombinant helper nucleic acid comprising:

- 5 (a) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence;
- (b) an alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette, which is in the 5' to 3' orientation, wherein the NOI encodes one or more alphavirus structural proteins; and
- 10 (c) a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

23. The recombinant helper nucleic acid of claim 22, wherein the alphavirus subgenomic promoter-IRES-heterologous NOI cassette further comprises a spacer non-coding nucleic acid sequence located 3' to the alphavirus subgenomic promoter and 5' to the IRES.

24. A cell comprising the recombinant helper nucleic acid of claim 22 or claim 23 and/or the recombinant replicon nucleic acid of any one of claims 1 to 17.

25. A method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- 20 (a) introducing into a cell the following:
- (i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to any one of claims 1 to 17; and
- (ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins, wherein the one or more helper nucleic acids produce all of the alphavirus structural proteins; and
- 25 (b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein the recombinant replicon nucleic acid further comprises a nucleotide sequence encoding an alphavirus structural protein.

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27. The method of claim 25, wherein the helper nucleic acid is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising:

- 5 (a) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; or
(b) a promoter sequence and a nucleotide sequence encoding one or more alphavirus structural proteins.

10 28. The method of claim 27, wherein the helper nucleic acid is DNA.

29. The method of claim 27, wherein the promoter is a CMV promoter.

30. The method of claim 27, wherein the helper nucleic acid comprises nucleotide sequences encoding all of the alphavirus structural proteins.

15 31. The method of claim 25, wherein the helper nucleic acid is a recombinant nucleic acid comprising:

- 20 (a) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; or
(b) a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, an IRES element, a nucleic acid encoding an alphavirus structural protein and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence.

25 32. A method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- (a) introducing into a cell the following:
30 (i) an alphavirus replicon RNA comprising a 5' alphavirus replication recognition sequence, nucleic acid sequence(s) encoding alphavirus nonstructural proteins, an alphavirus subgenomic promoter, a heterologous nucleic acid sequence and a 3' alphavirus replication recognition sequence; and

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- (ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a recombinant nucleic acid according to claim 22 or claim 23, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and
- (b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

5

33. A method of making infectious, defective alphavirus particles, comprising:

- (a) introducing into a cell the following:
 - (i) a recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to any one of claims 1 to 17; and
 - (ii) one or more helper nucleic acids encoding alphavirus structural proteins comprising a recombinant nucleic acid according to claim 22 or claim 23, whereby all of the alphavirus structural proteins are produced in the cell; and
- (b) producing said alphavirus particles in the cell.

10

15

34. An infectious defective alphavirus particle produced by the method of any one of claims 25 to 33.

20

35. A method of eliciting an immune response in a subject, comprising administering to the subject an immunogenic amount of the population of claim 18 or claim 19, the composition of claim 20 or the particle of claim 21 or claim 34.

25

36. Use of an immunogenic amount of the population of claim 18 or claim 19, the composition of claim 20 or the particle of claim 21 or claim 34 in the manufacture of a medicament for eliciting an immune response in a subject.

30

37. A recombinant replicon nucleic acid according to claim 1 or claim 15, a population of infectious, defective, alphavirus particles according to claim 18, a pharmaceutical composition according to claim 20, an alphavirus particle according to claim 21, a recombinant helper nucleic acid according to claim 22, a cell according to claim 24, a method according to any one of claims 25, 32, 33 or 35, an infectious defective alphavirus particle according to claim 34, or use according to claim 36, substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to any one of the examples or figures.

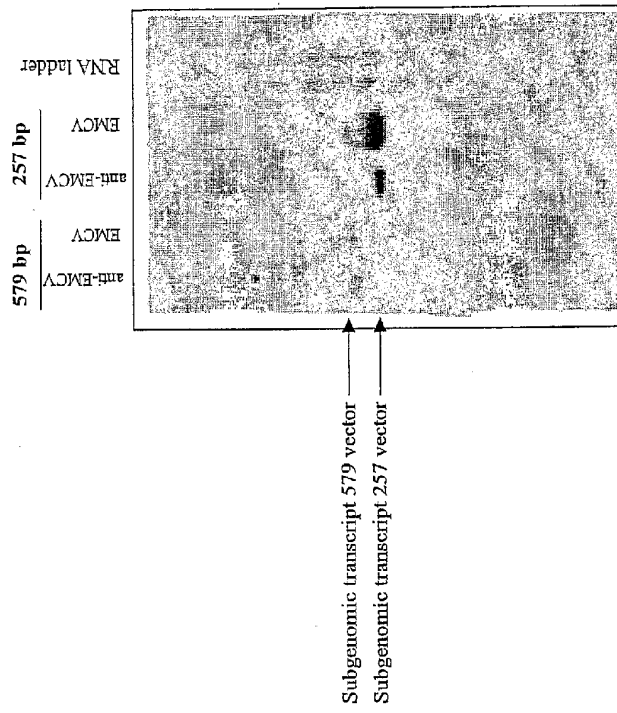


Figure 1. Northern analysis of spacer-IRES replicon subgenomic RNAs

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SEQUENCE LISTING

<110> Alphavax, Inc.
Smith, Johnathan F.
Kamrud, Kurt
Caley, Ian

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tttggcagct ctaataagac tgcagcaata cttatcttcc atttgaacag attgttactt 240
gaccaaggga agttaatagc aaaagtaact gcagggcaca tgtatgtcat gggcaaaaaa 300
aaaaaagtaa cagcaattaa ggtttgcagg tacttagaat ttttctgag ccaccctcta 360
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tcatgcatga aaatcagaaa tatttcatac tcttaaagaa cacattggaa ccaatattat 480
gattaaaaca tattttgcta agcaaagaga tattaaaaat taattcatta acattctgaa 540
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