VCell Tutorial

Building a Rule-Based Model

We will demonstrate how to create a rule-based model of EGFR receptor interaction with two adapter proteins Grb2 and Shc. A Receptor-monomer reversibly binds a ligand at the extracellular domain, triggering dimerization through transmembrane domains. The receptor kinase transphosphorylates two receptor phosphotyrosines that independently recruit two adapter proteins, Grb2 and Shc. Shc itself is subject to transhphosporylation, where the phosphorylated form has a lower affinity to a receptor phosphotyrosine.

The model is available in VCell Database (left bottom panel) -> BioModels -> Tutorial VCell 6.0 (Rule-based) -> RB_egfr_tutorial

In this tutorial you will learn how to:

- Create a rule-based **Physiology** with Molecules, Species, Rules and Observables.
- Simulate a model using **Deterministic application** that expands rules into a reaction network using the **BioNetGen** engine.
- Simulate a model using **Stochastic application** that simulates the reaction network generated by **BioNetGen**.
- Simulate a model using **Network-Free** application that skips network generation and directly computes Observables using **NFSim** engine.

General familiarity with VCell software is recommended. Although this tutorial can be followed by a VCell novice, it is recommended that novice users first look through the VCell tutorials available at http://vcell.org/vcell_software/user_guide.html .

Model building can be matched to the BioModel *RB_egfr_tutorial* in the Tutorial VCell 6.0 (Rule-based) folder in the VCell Database.

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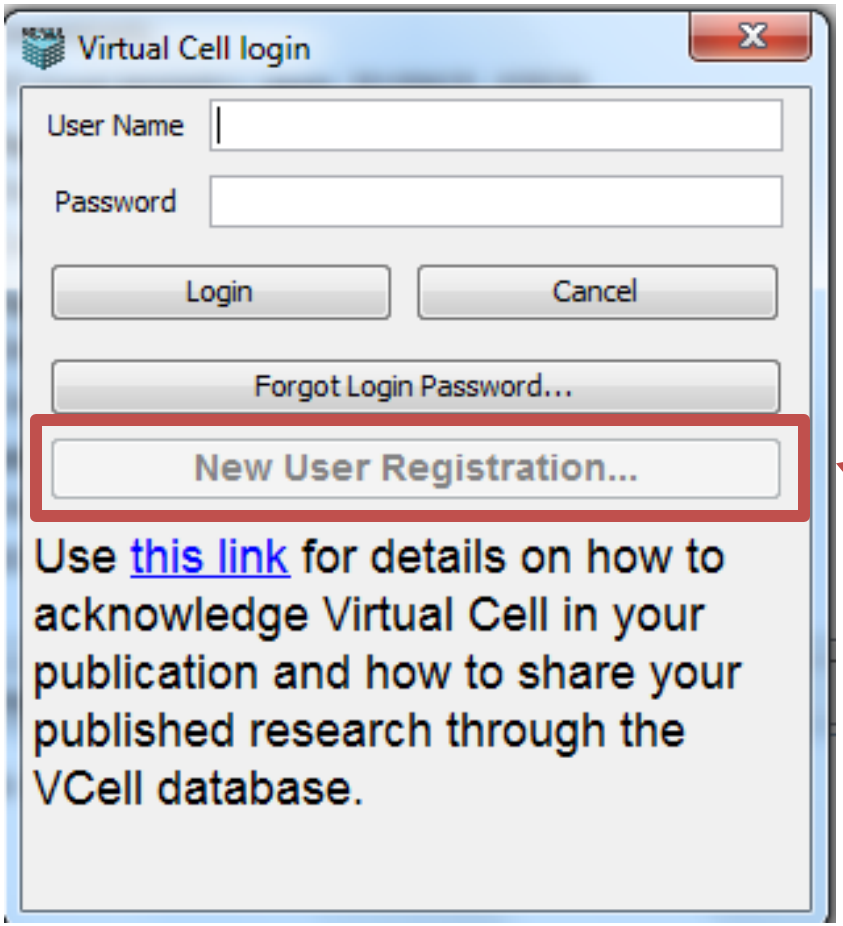
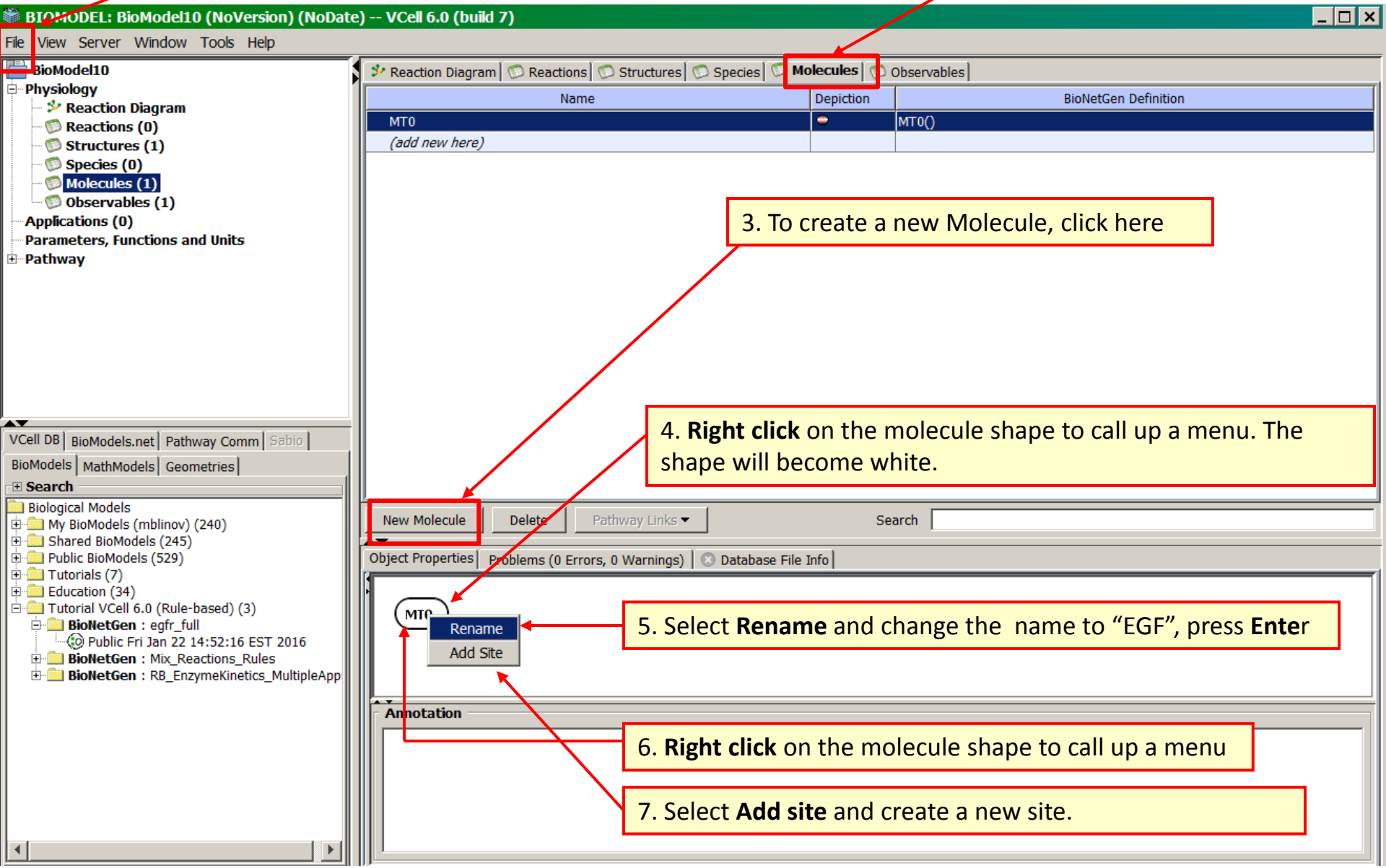
Opening VCell for the First Time



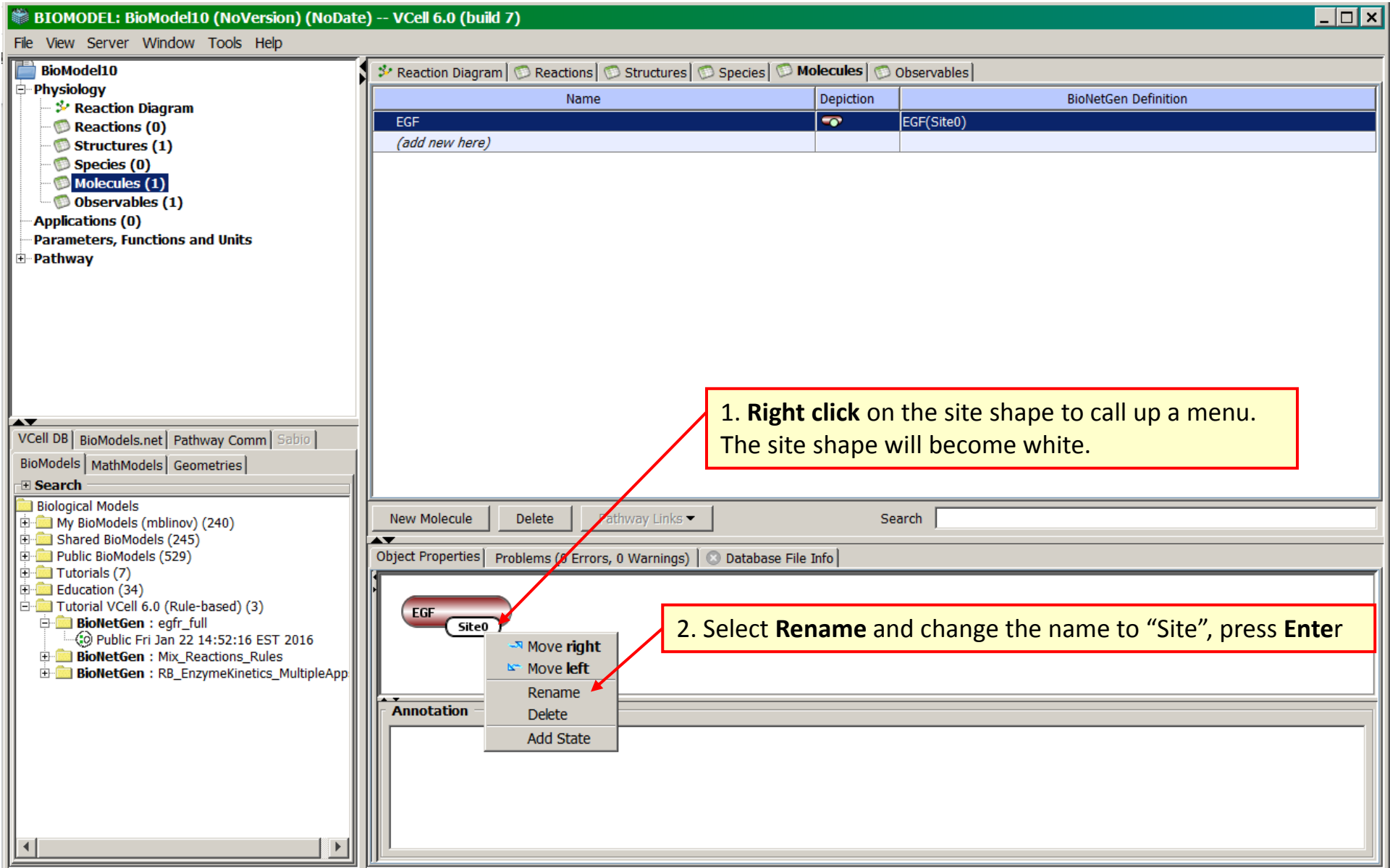
You need to register as a new user if you want to run simulations on VCell compute resources, or use the VCell database to view and store models that can be shared with collaborators.

1. To create a new VCell model, click File > New > BioModel

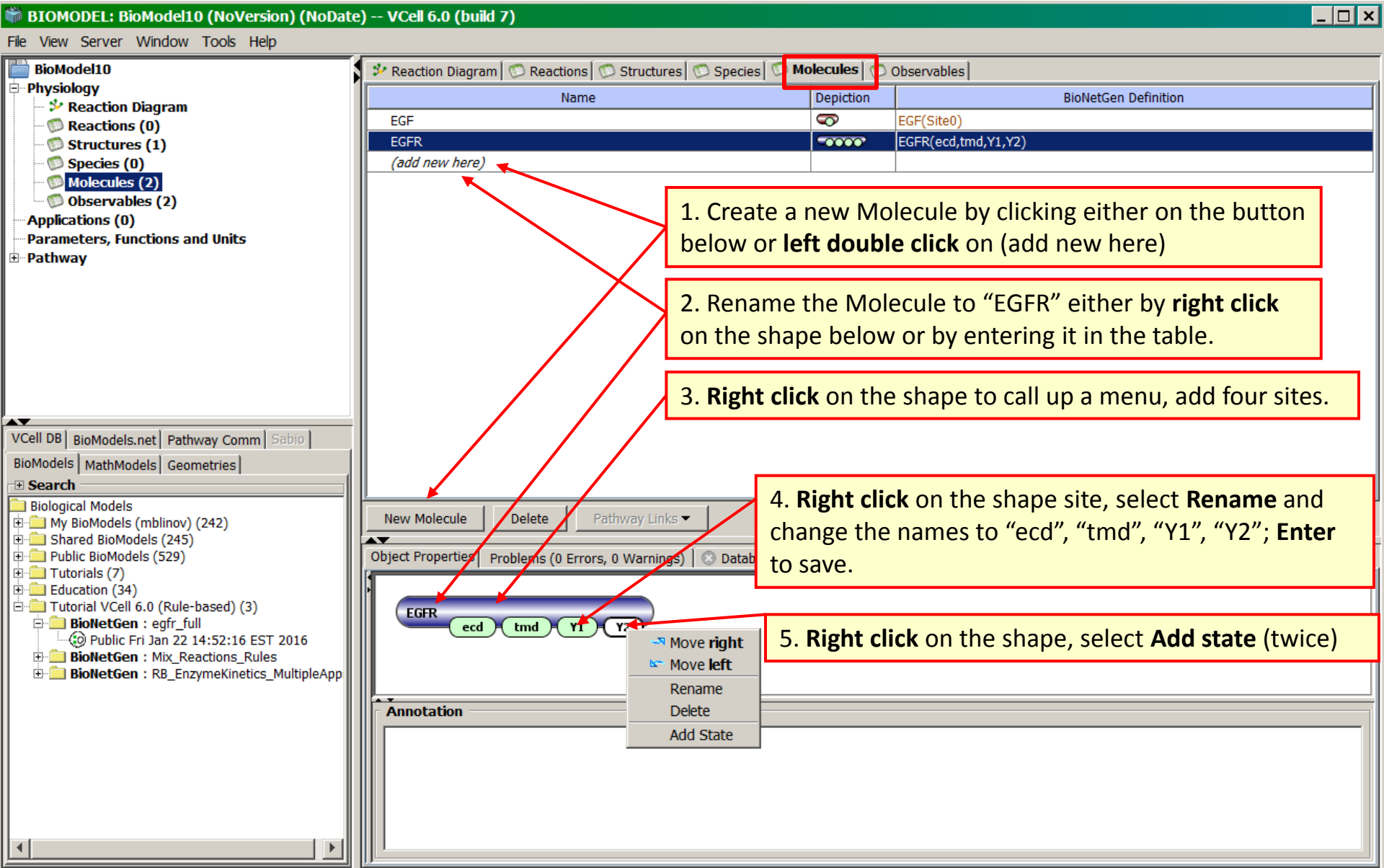
2. To start creating Molecules, click on **Molecules**



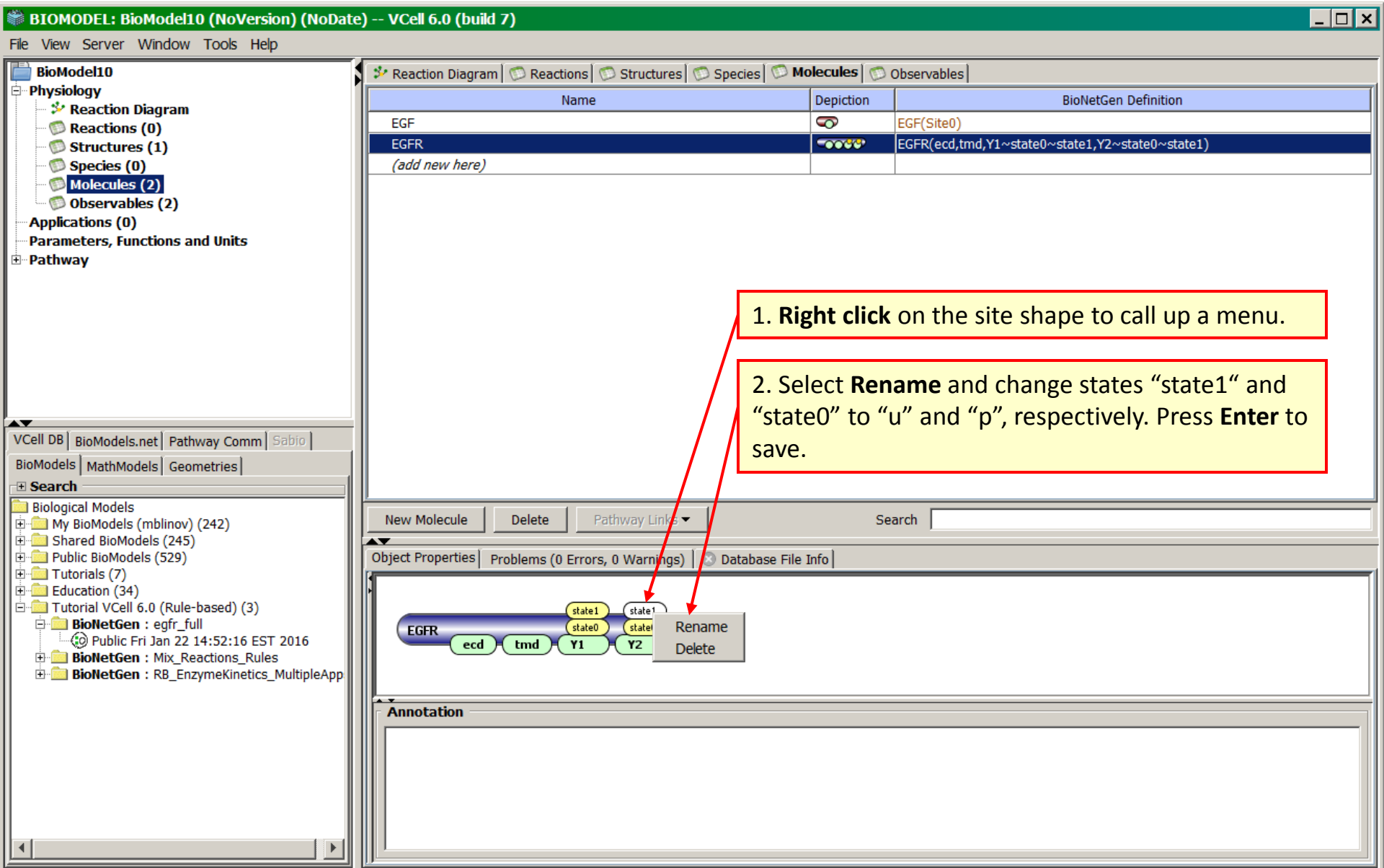
TIP: If something goes wrong, press **ESC** on the keyboard.



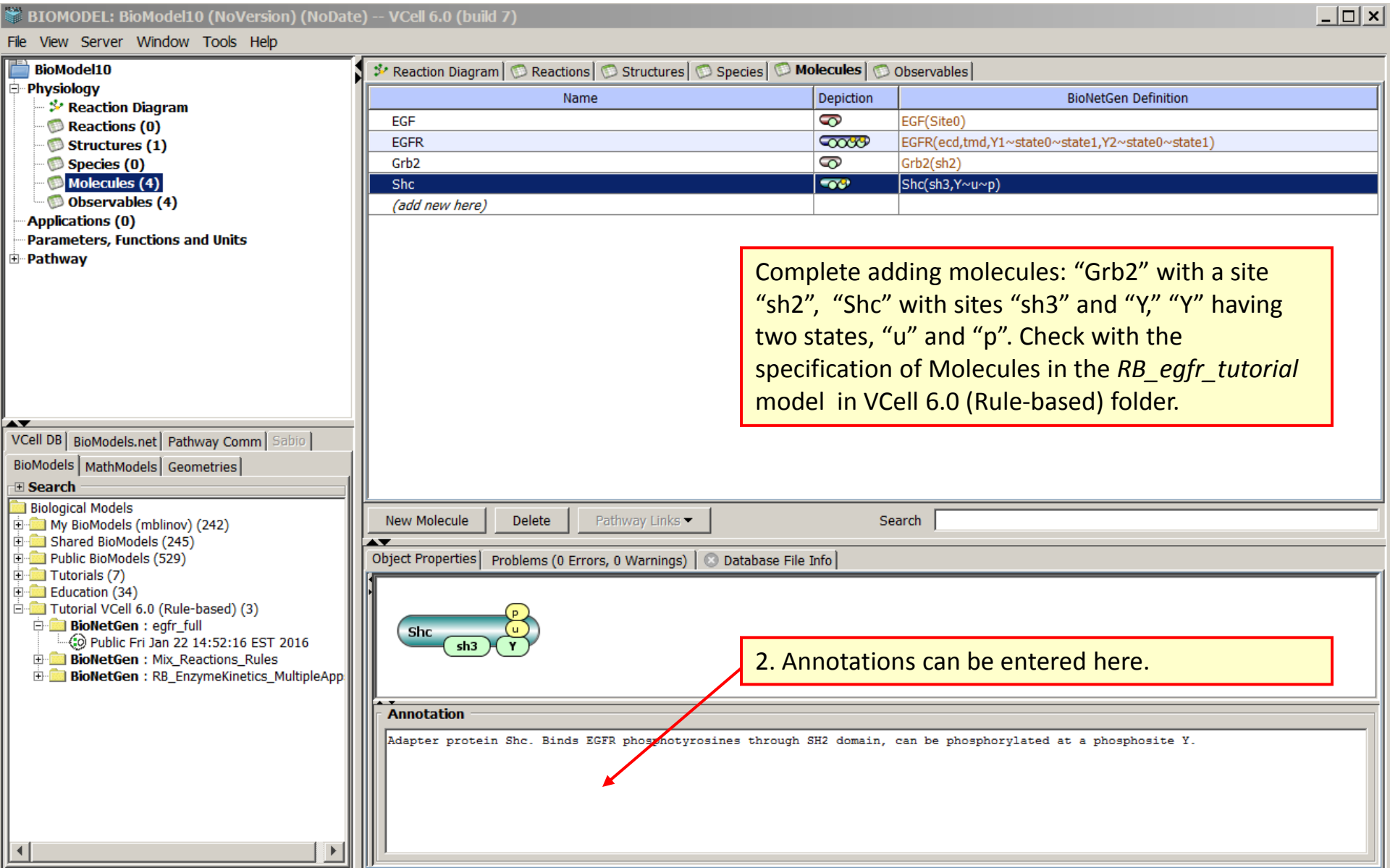
TIP: A Molecule name can always be changed by double clicking in Name field, editing, and pressing **ENTER**. It does not matter if the molecule is already used elsewhere – the change will be propagated everywhere in the model.



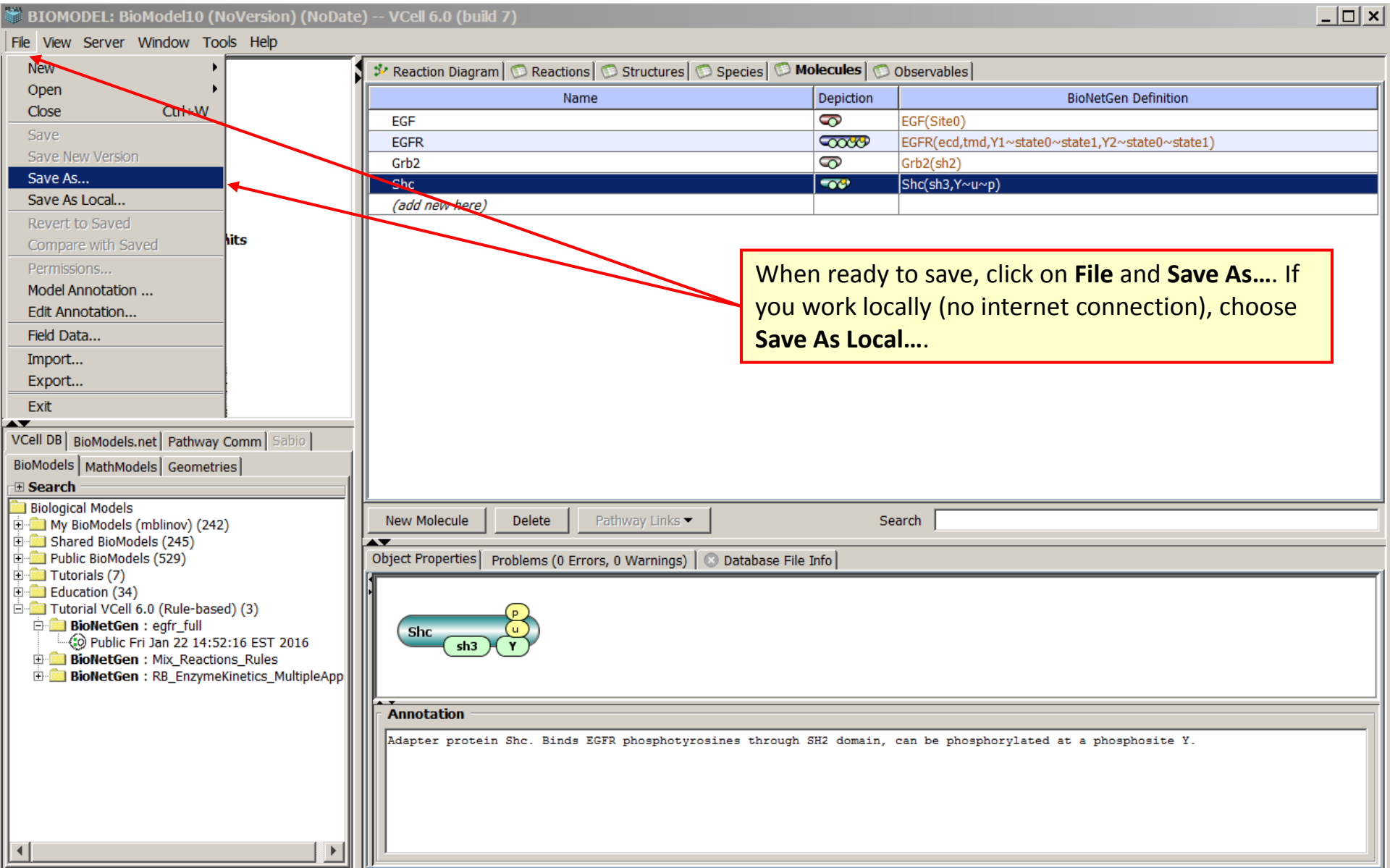
TIP: Sites can always be moved right and left among the Molecule length and renamed, states can always be renamed. To delete a state, you must first eliminate all places where this site is used, e.g. in reaction rules that change the site.



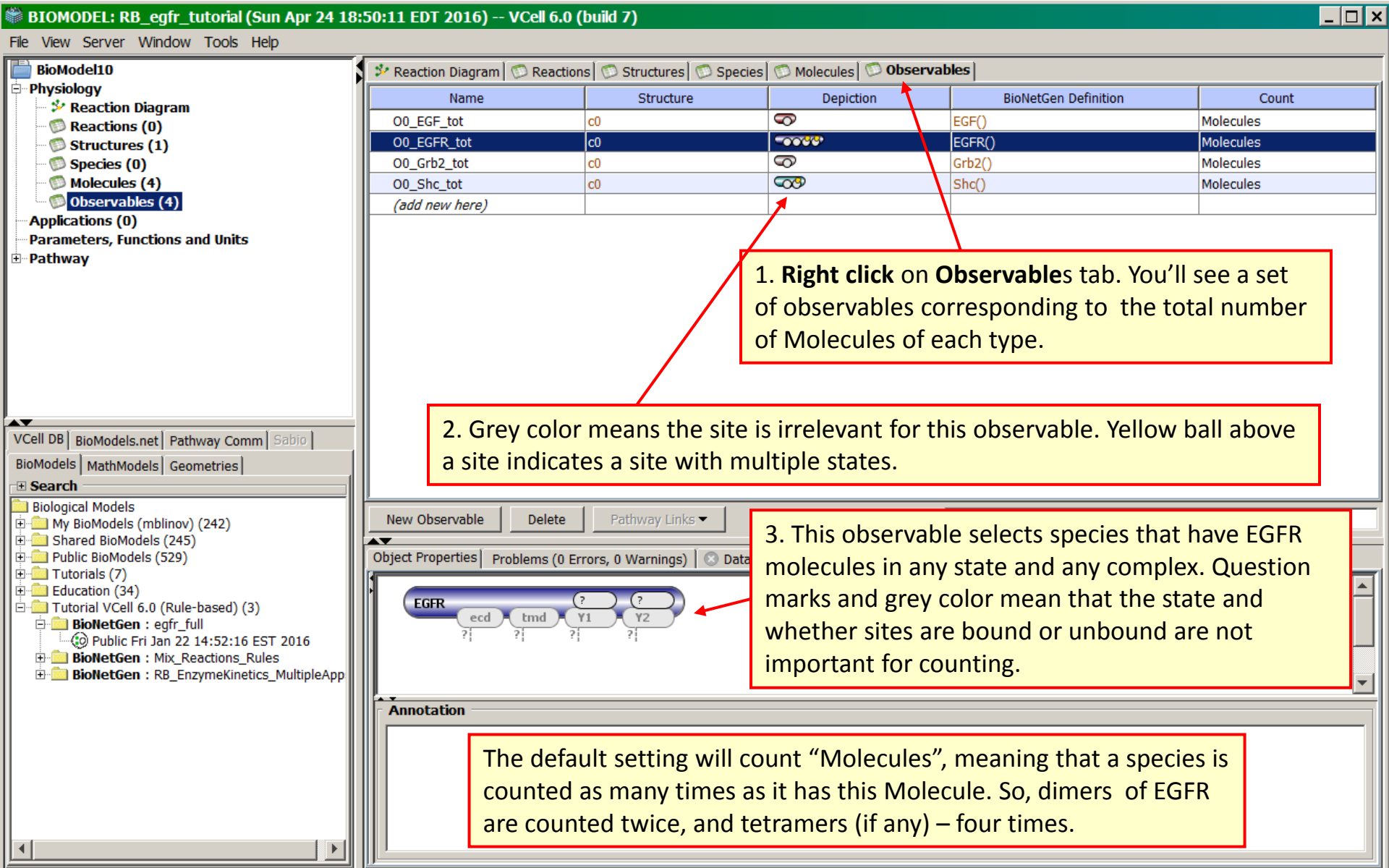
TIP: Molecule colors are ordered and cannot be changed. Molecules can be added and/or deleted at any time, but reaction rules, species and observables that use these molecules must be deleted first. A warning will appear if deletion is not allowed.



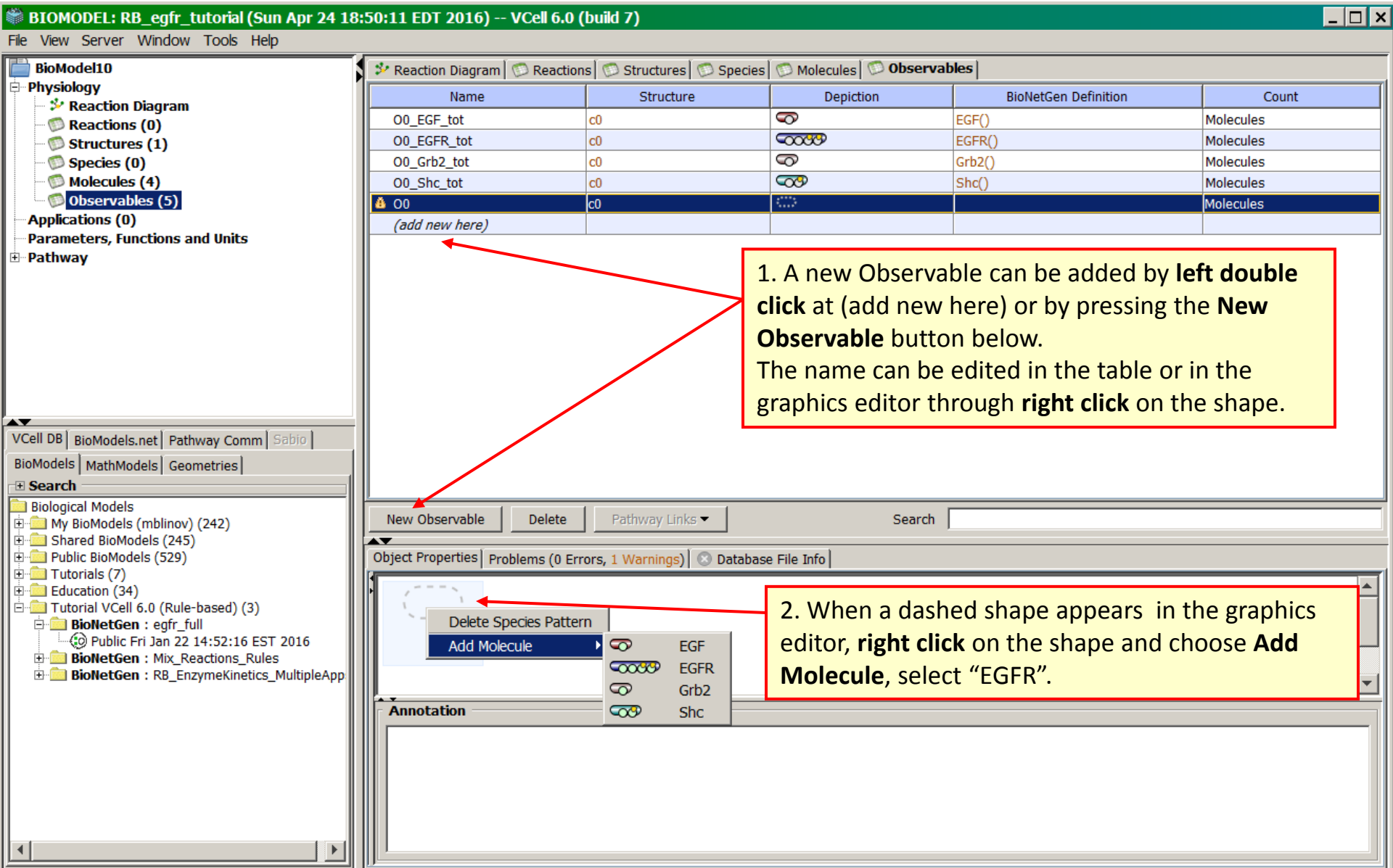
TIP: Save your model as often as you can, so you don't lose any changes!



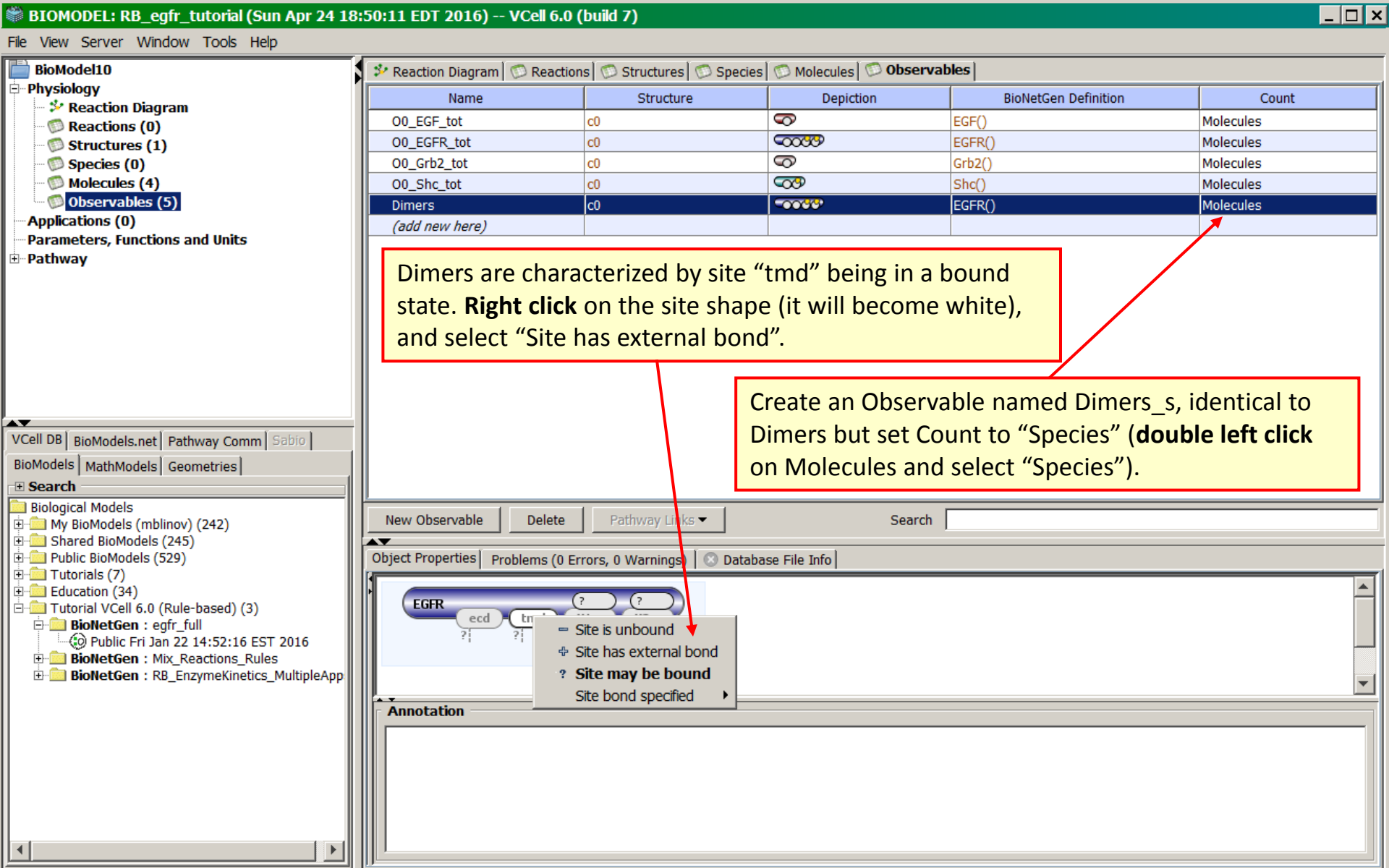
TIP: Each Observable corresponds to a sum of species selected by species patterns. Specific species are identified the network is generated using reaction rules.



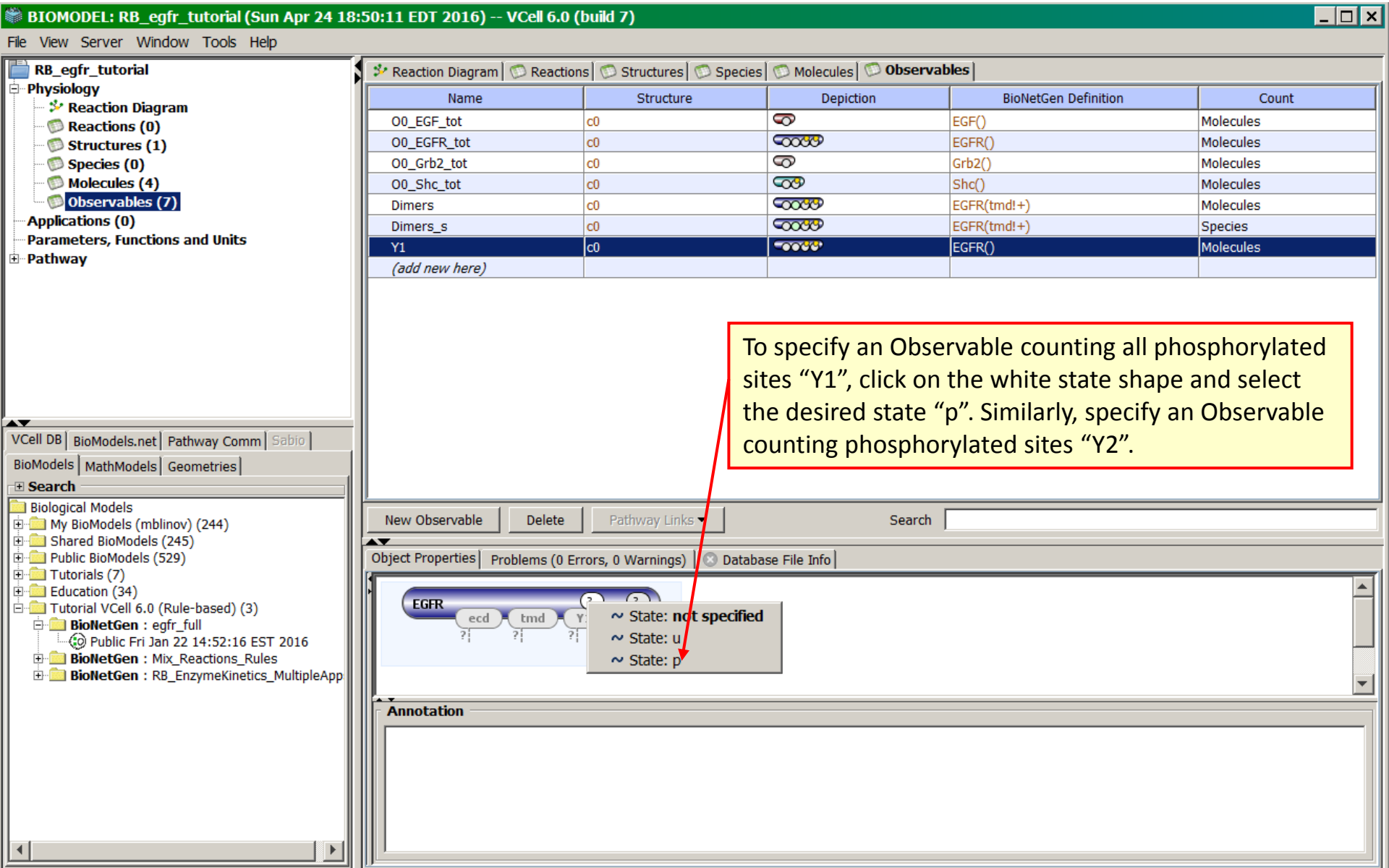
TIP: Every table has a column BioNetGen definition. It can be edited *only once* –the first time an object is specified. It is useful if you have separate BNGL code you want to paste, but do not want to import for some reason. If you paste in BNGL code, once you click enter it cannot be further edited unless you export back out as BNGL.



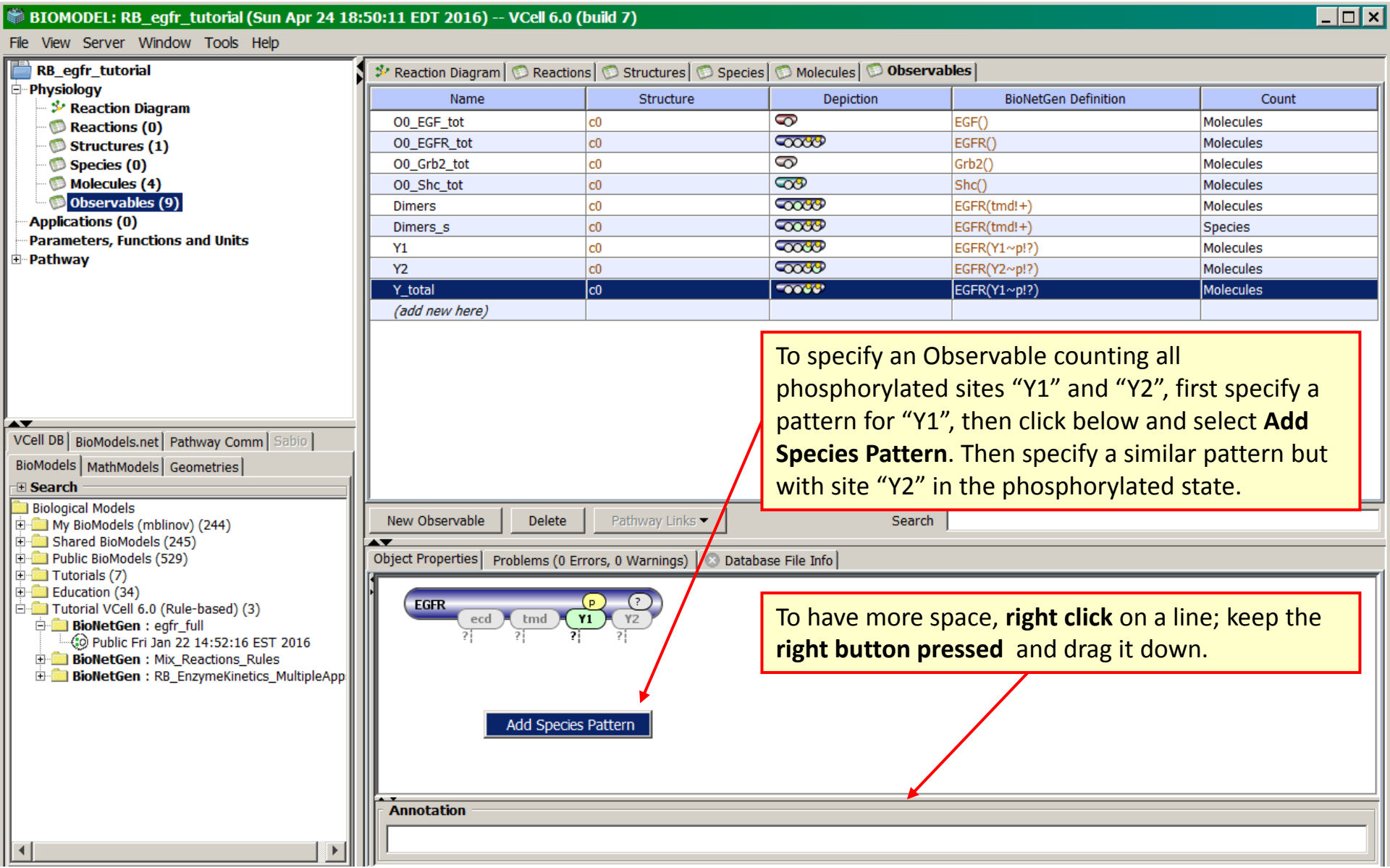
TIP: A yellow warning sign or red error sign may appear temporarily if something is wrong. After the error/warning is corrected, the sign will disappear within a few seconds.



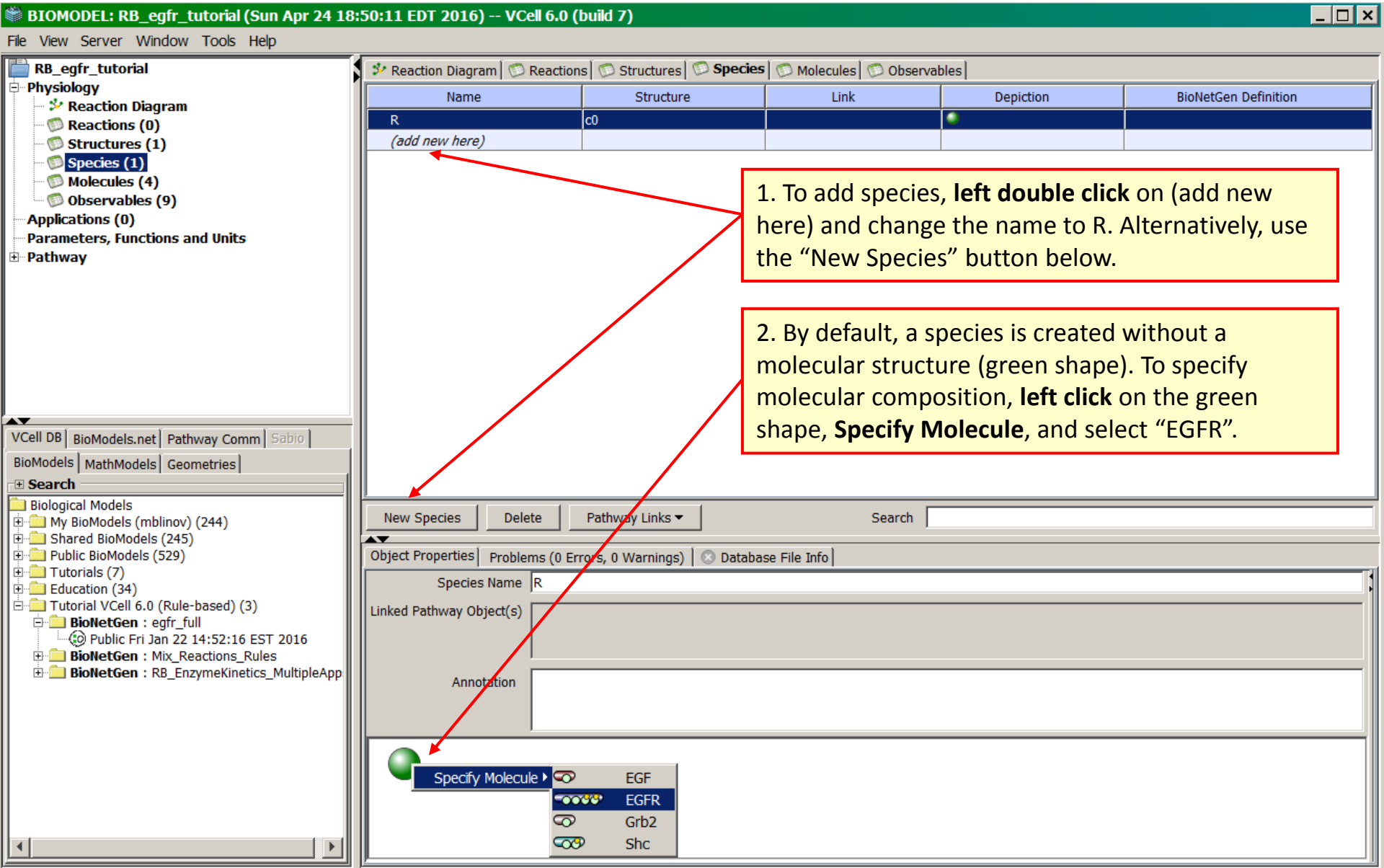
TIP: If you rename a Molecule, the Observable corresponding to its total will be renamed automatically as long as you do not change its name. For example, changing **_tot** to **_total** will decouple the Observable from the Molecule definition, and it will be no longer renamed automatically if you change the name of this molecule.



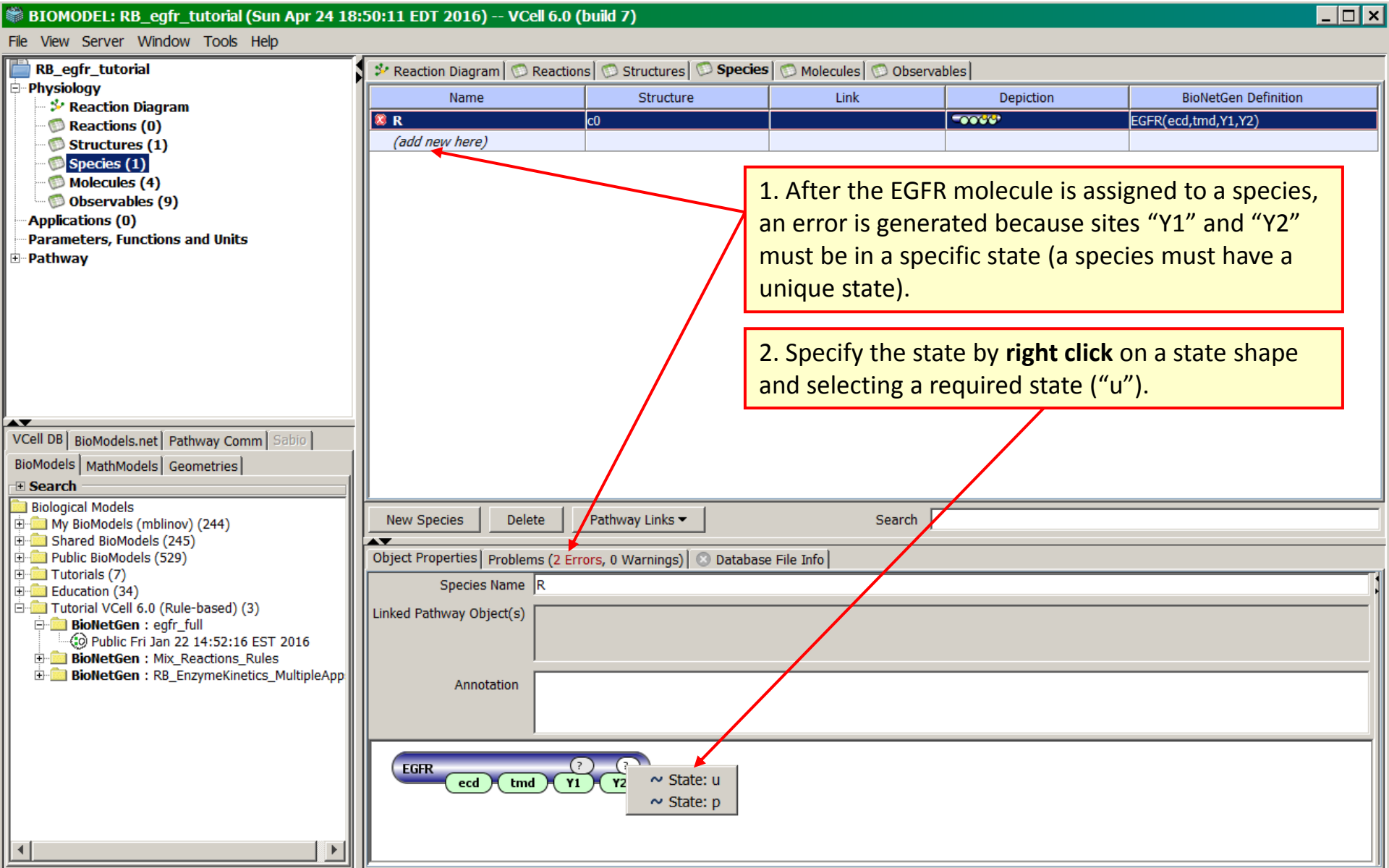
TIP: Species corresponding to each Observable can be seen after network generation under Application > Simulations > Generated Math > Math Description Language.



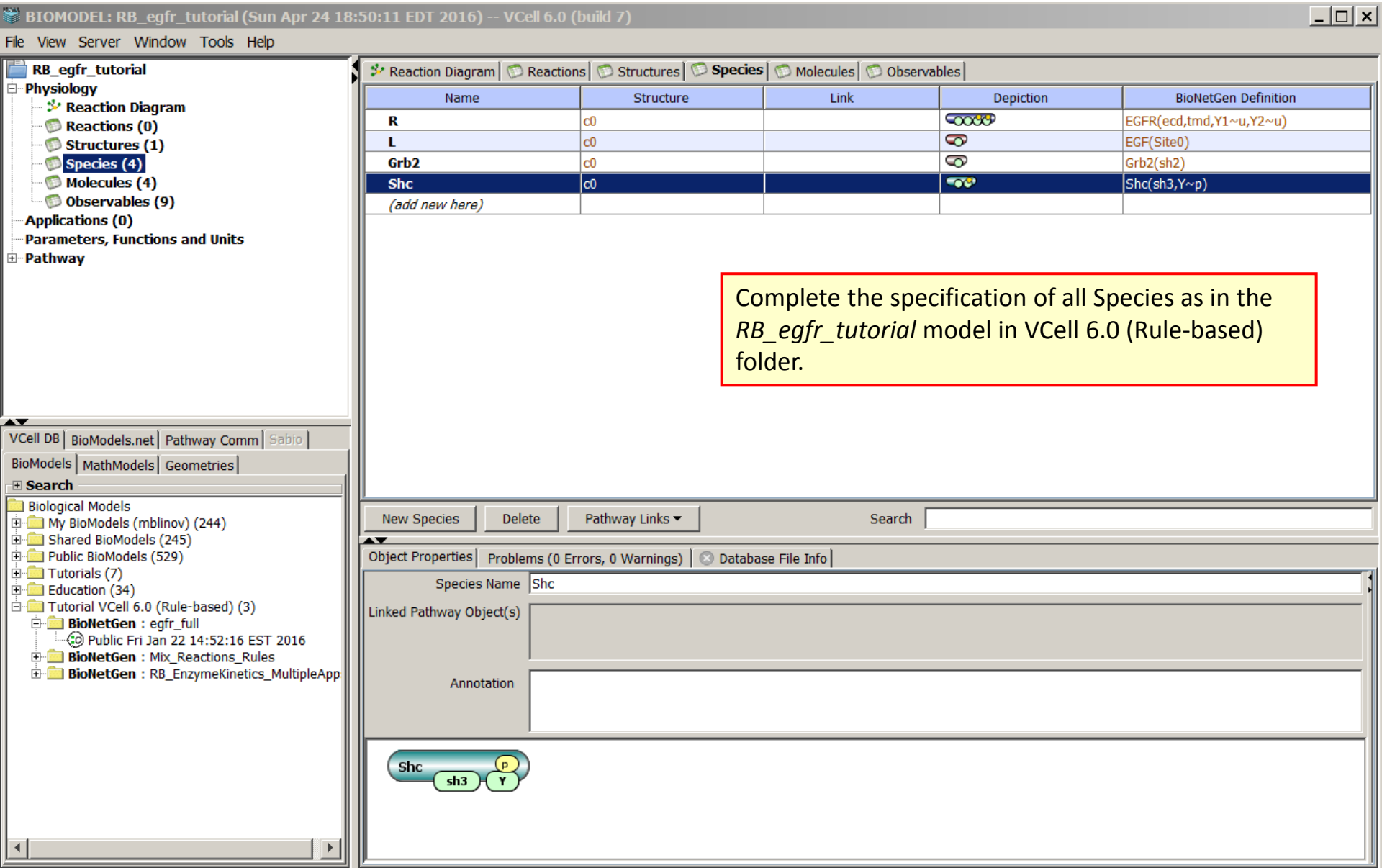
TIP: Species may consist of more than one molecule, but the molecules must be connected.



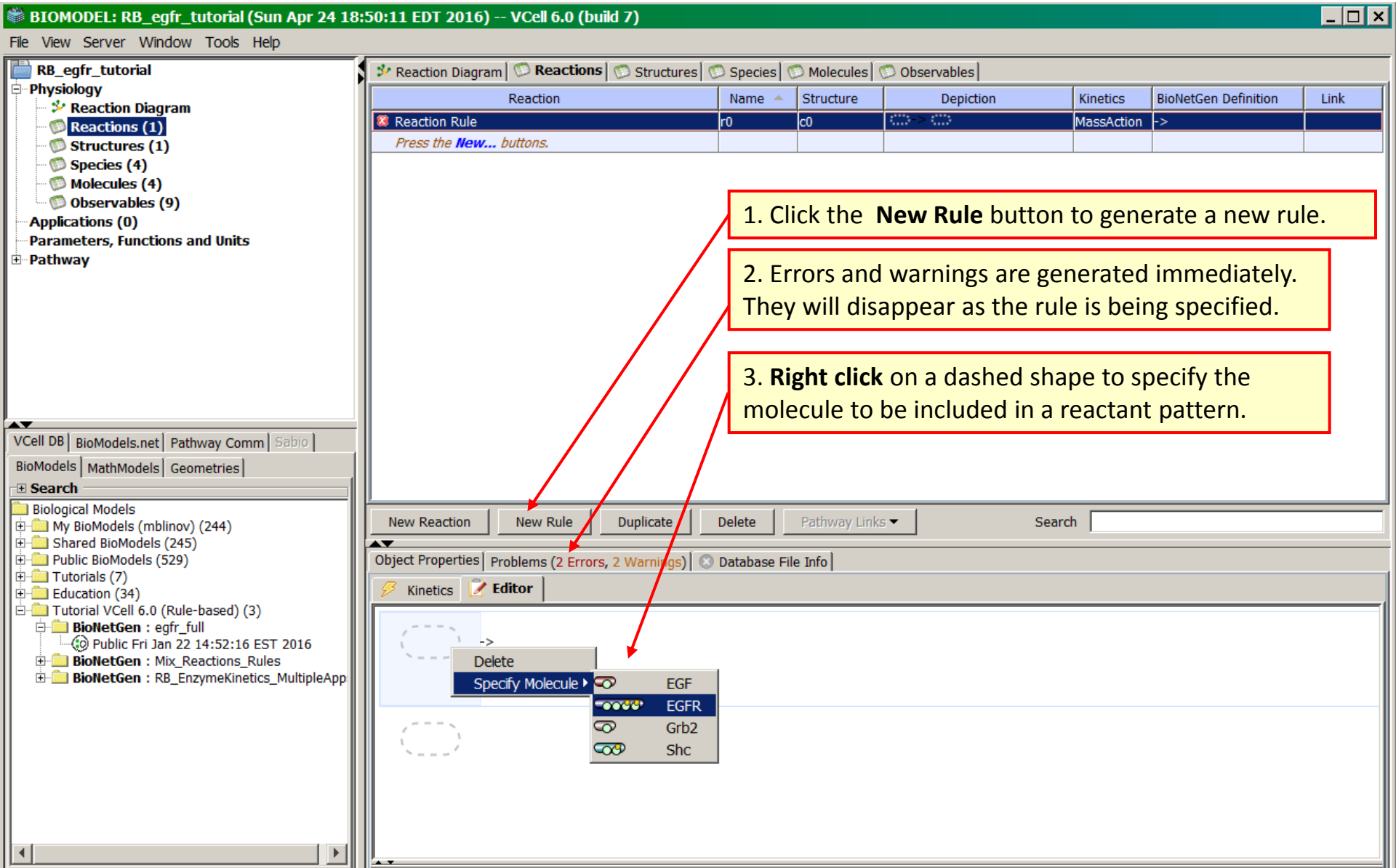
TIP: **Left click** on the Problems tab will show the list of errors and warnings. **Double left click** on a problem will bring up the issue.



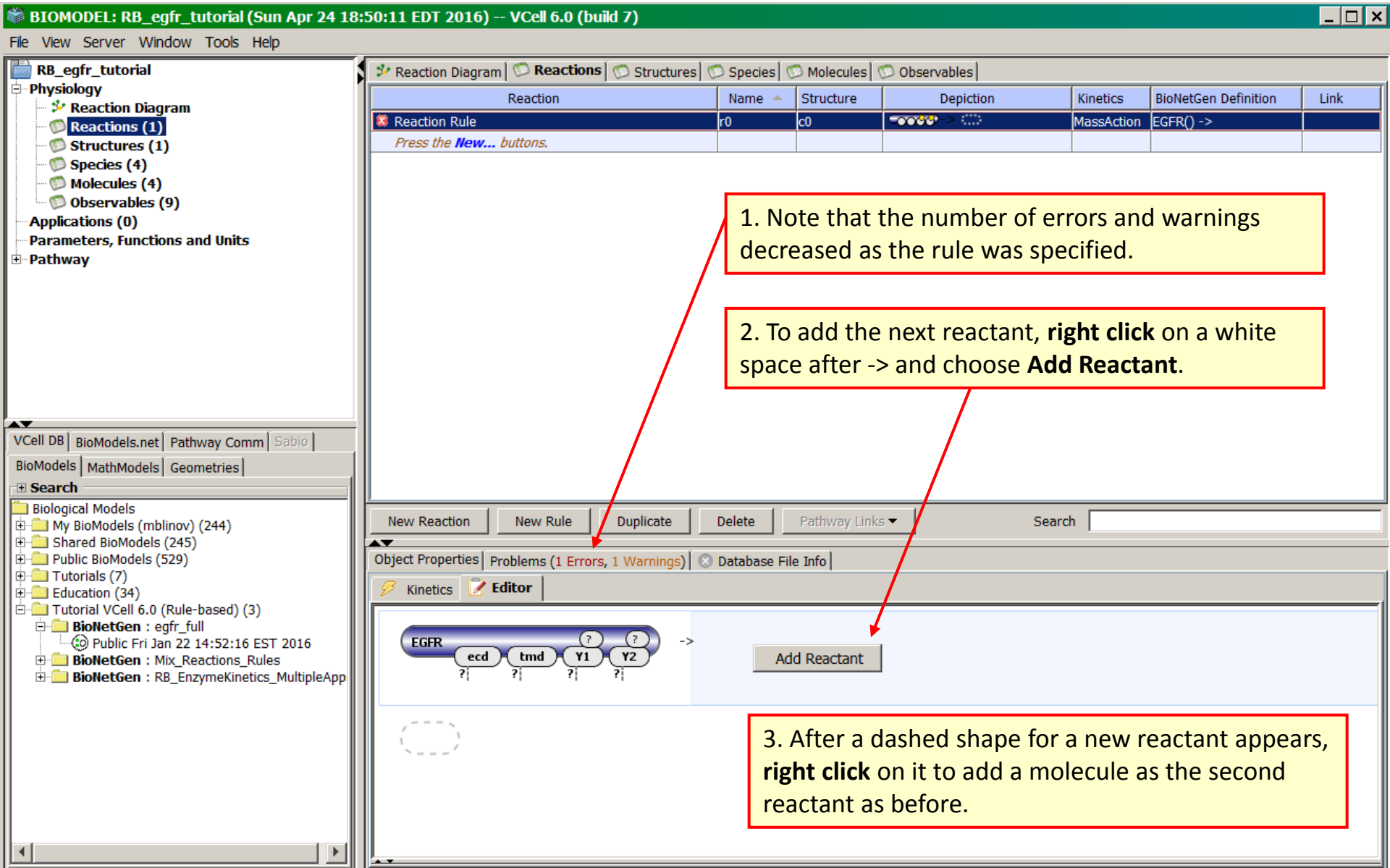
TIP: **Left click** on a Table column name (e.g. Name) will sort the table by this column.



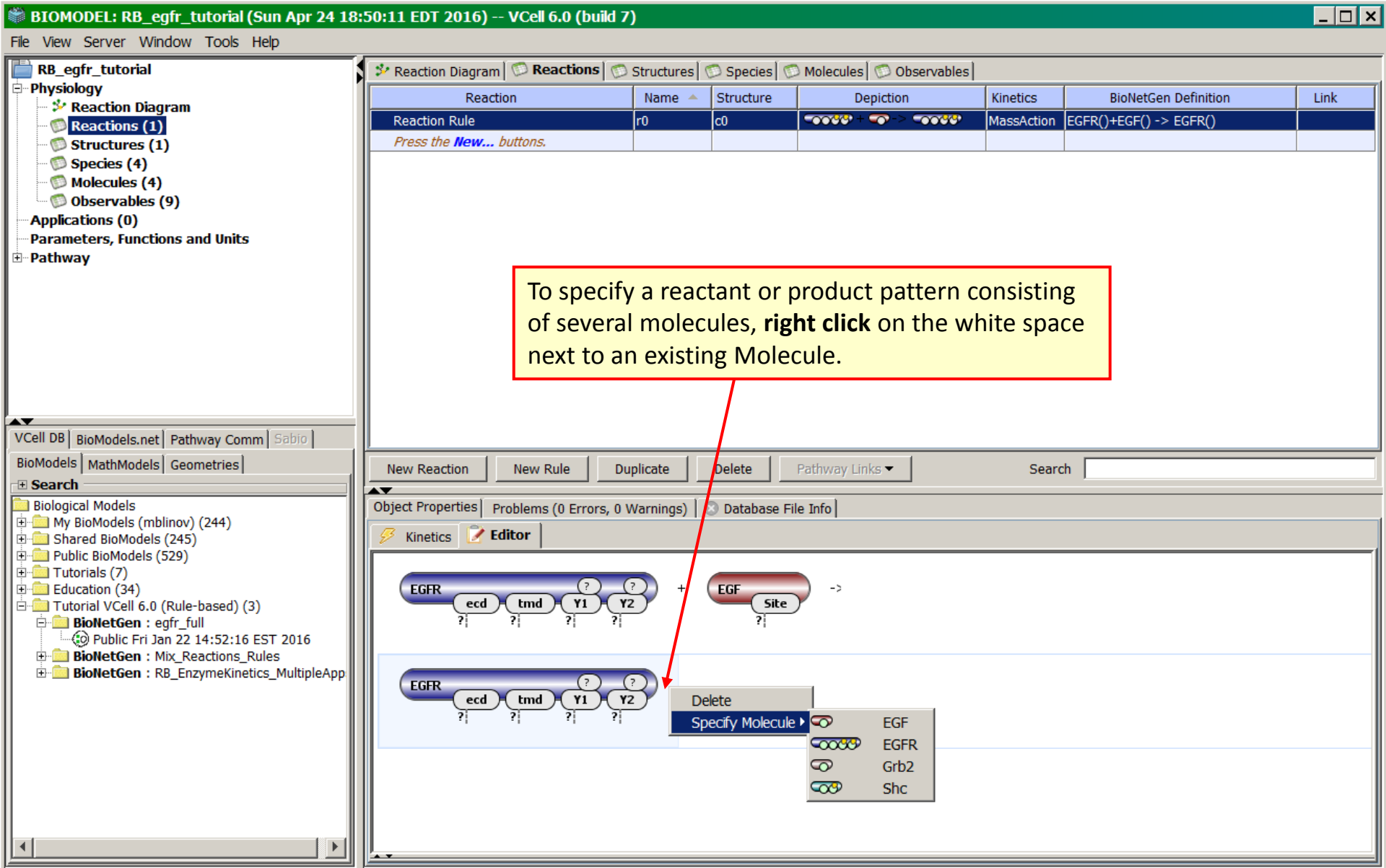
TIP: Reaction rules generate reactions by selecting species that serve as reactants and generating new species i.e. the products of these reactions. Thus, each reaction rule is defined with reactant patterns (that select species to be reactants) and products patterns (to define how reactant molecules are modified).



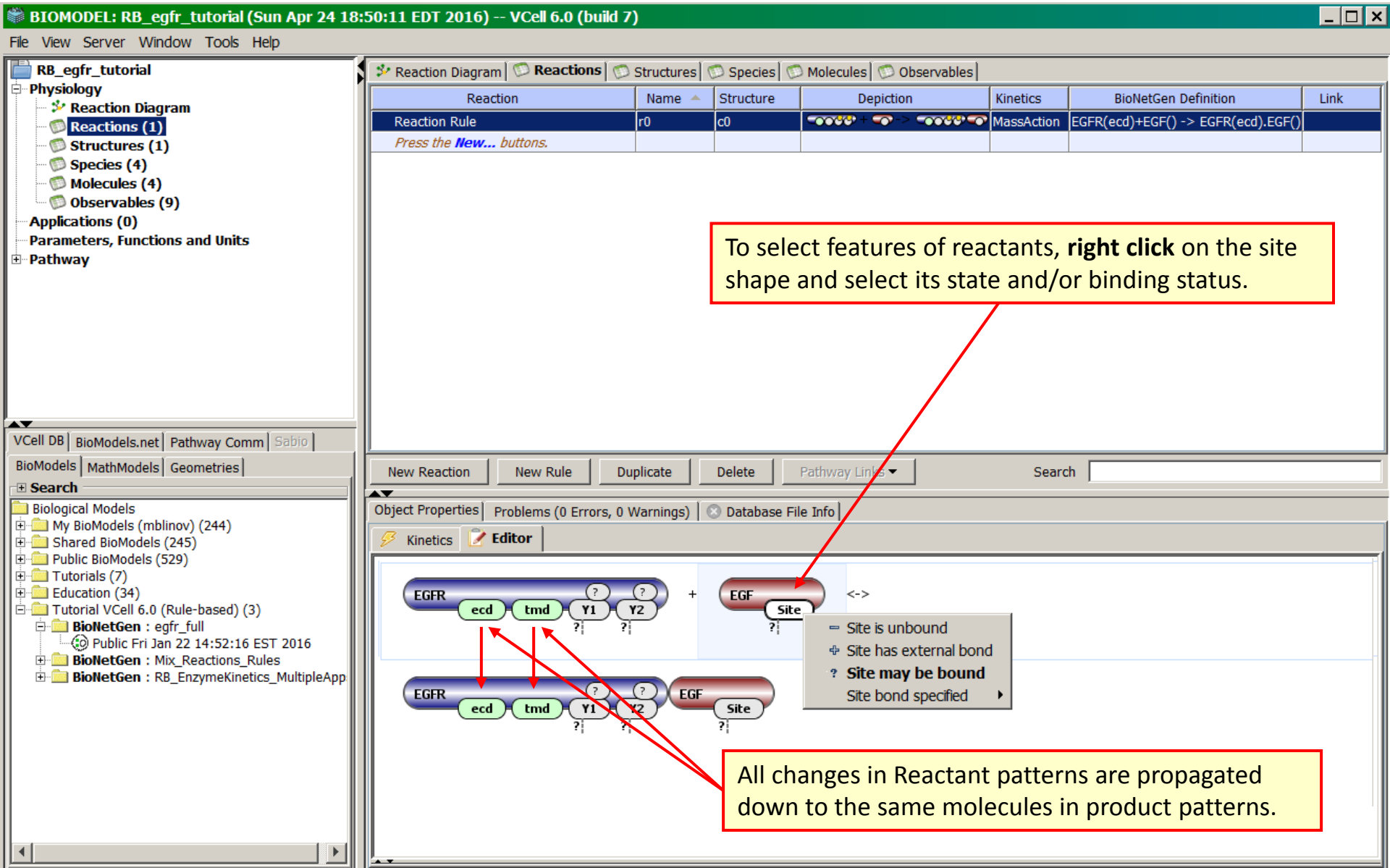
TIP: Always check errors and warnings until you understand the issue. If in trouble, use Help from the top menu. It is fully searchable. It can be printed from http://vcell.org



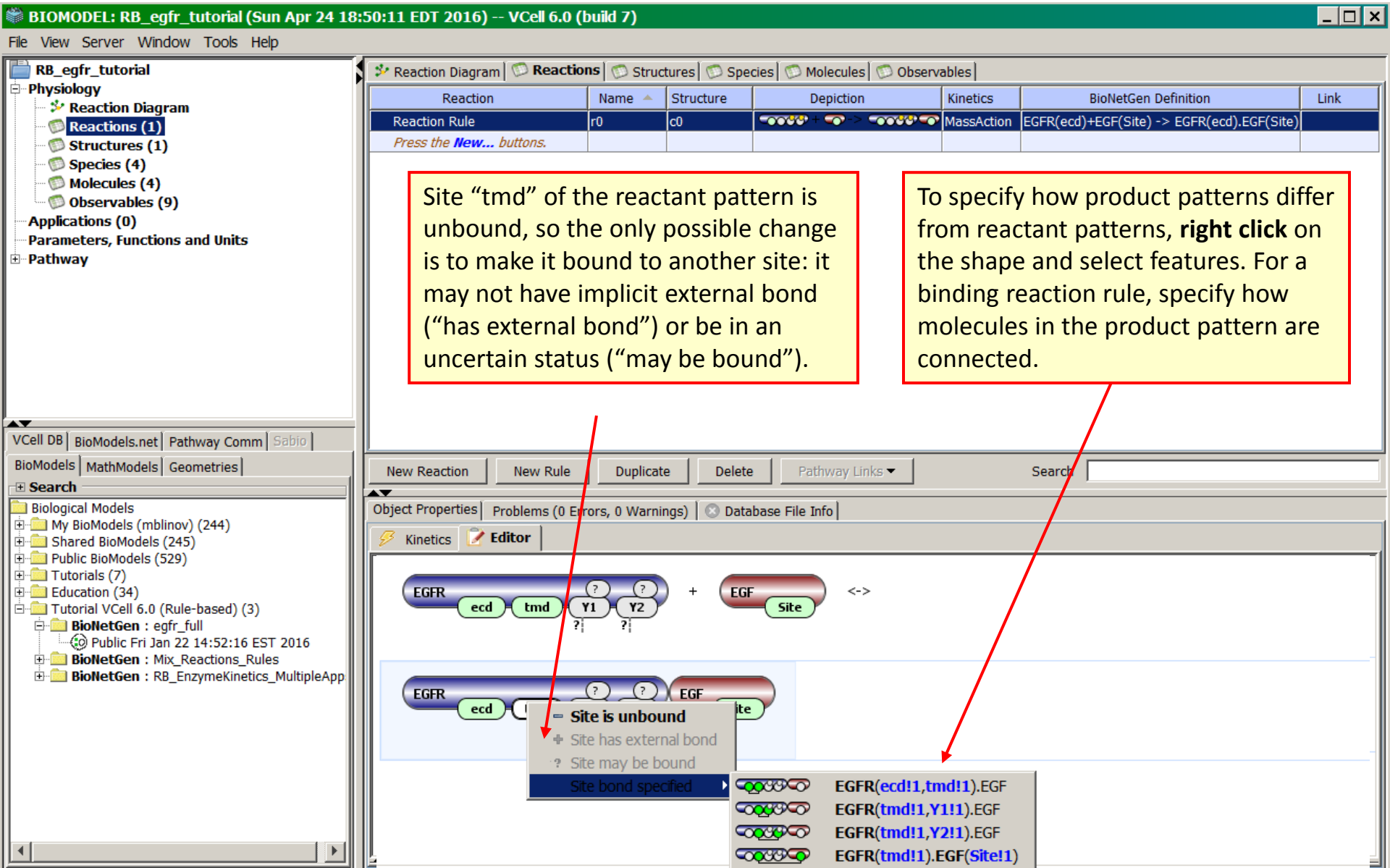
TIP: The search field can be used to filter all lists by an entered term, such as Molecule or site name.



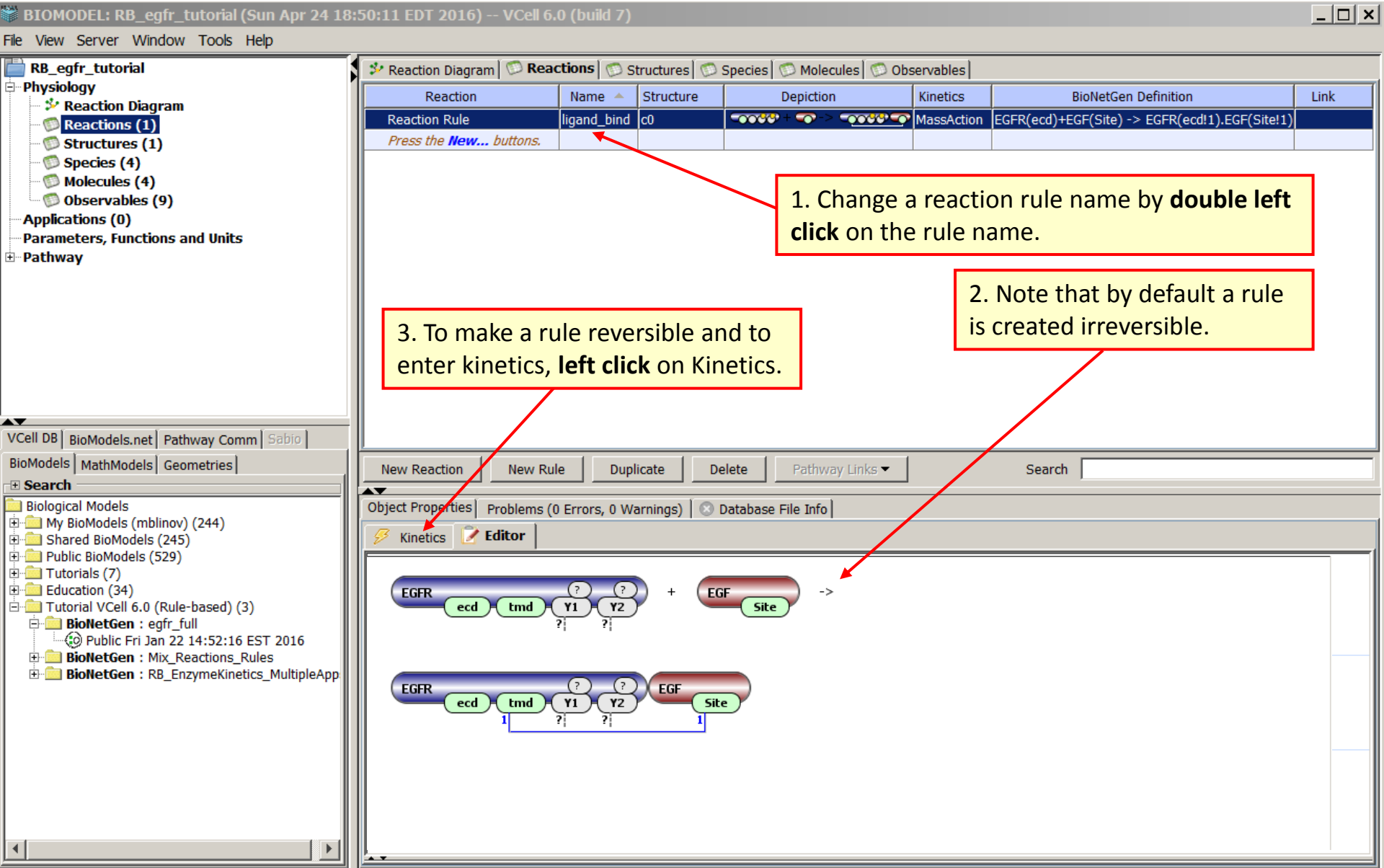
TIP: Molecules in reactant/product patterns can be rearranged by **right click** on the Molecule shape and choosing **Move right**/**Move left** actions.



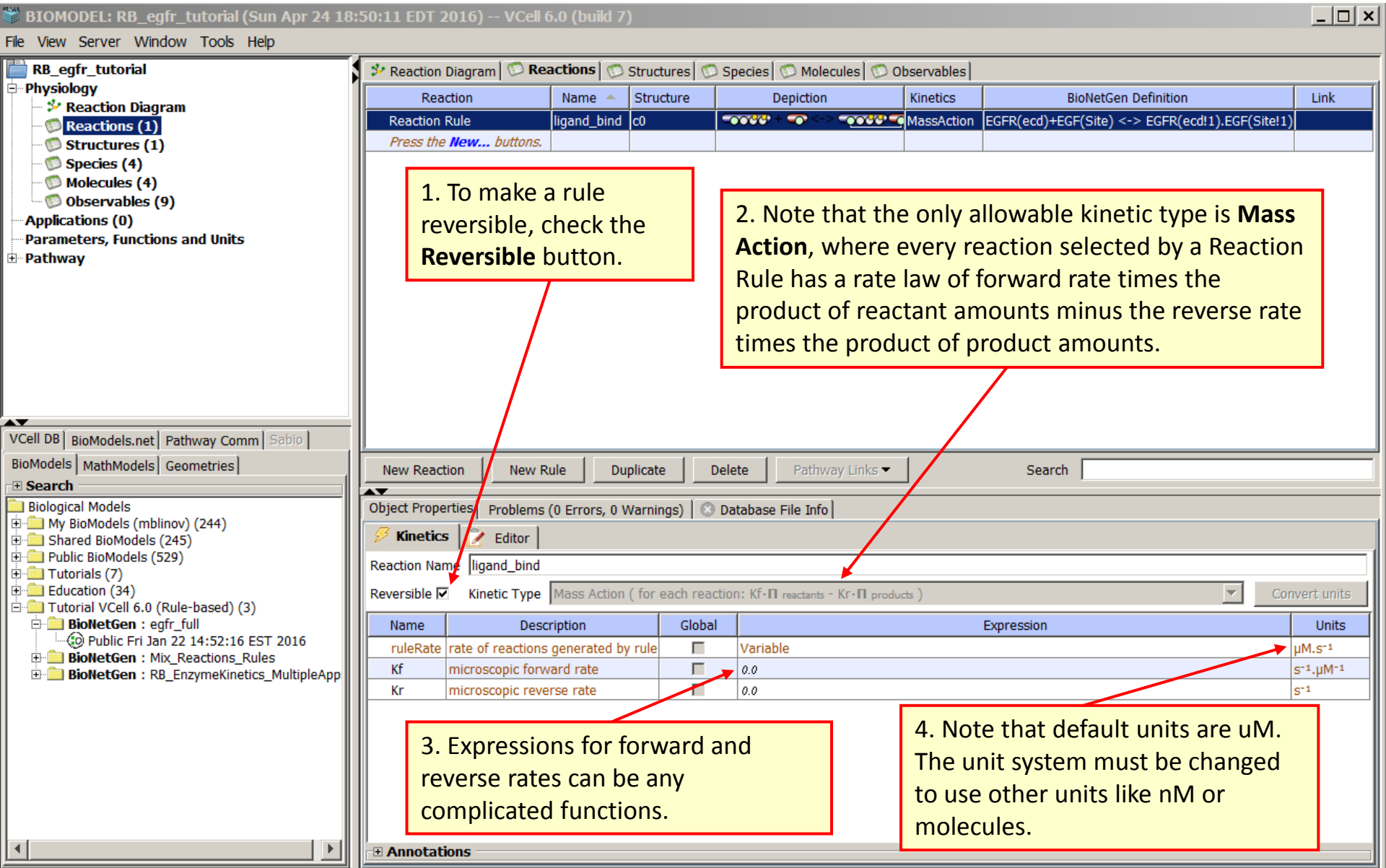
TIP: Note that some options for binding status are greyed out because they are impossible.



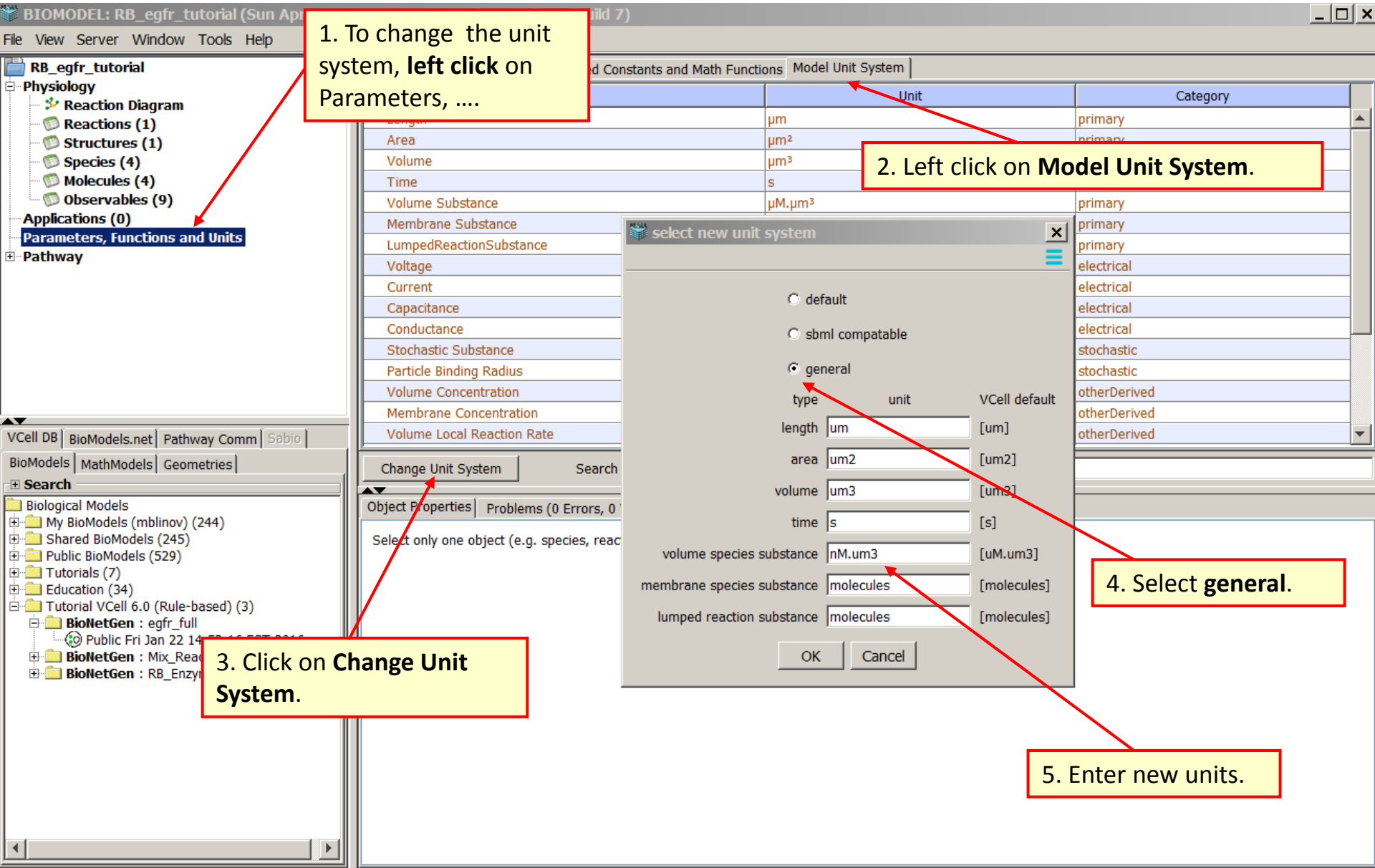
TIP: Sites in green without any symbols underneath are always unbound.



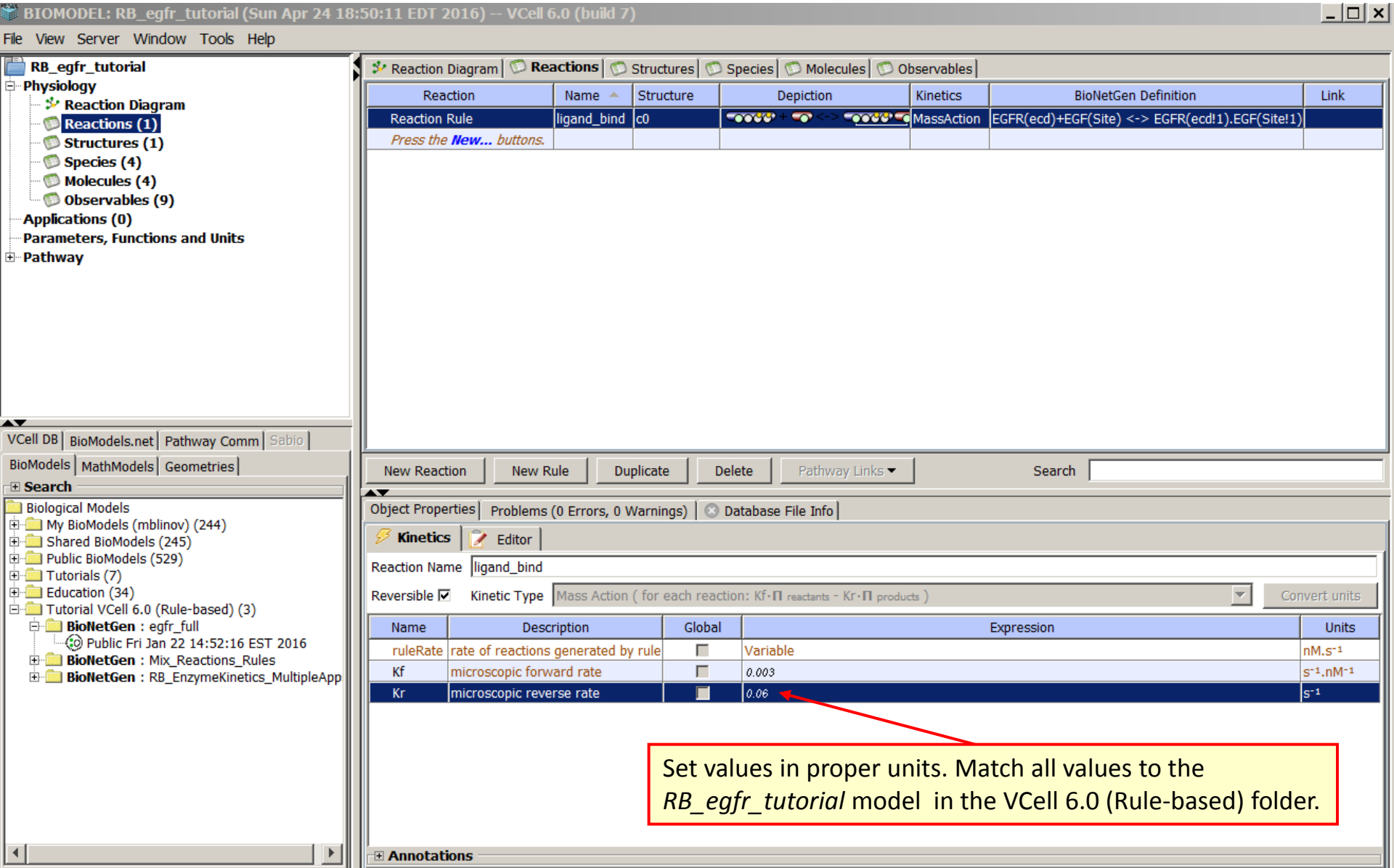
TIP: The numbers of specified Molecules, Species, Reactions and Observables are always displayed in the left panel.



TIP: The unit system must be changed before entering any numeric values. Otherwise, all values will be converted from the old units to a new unit system.

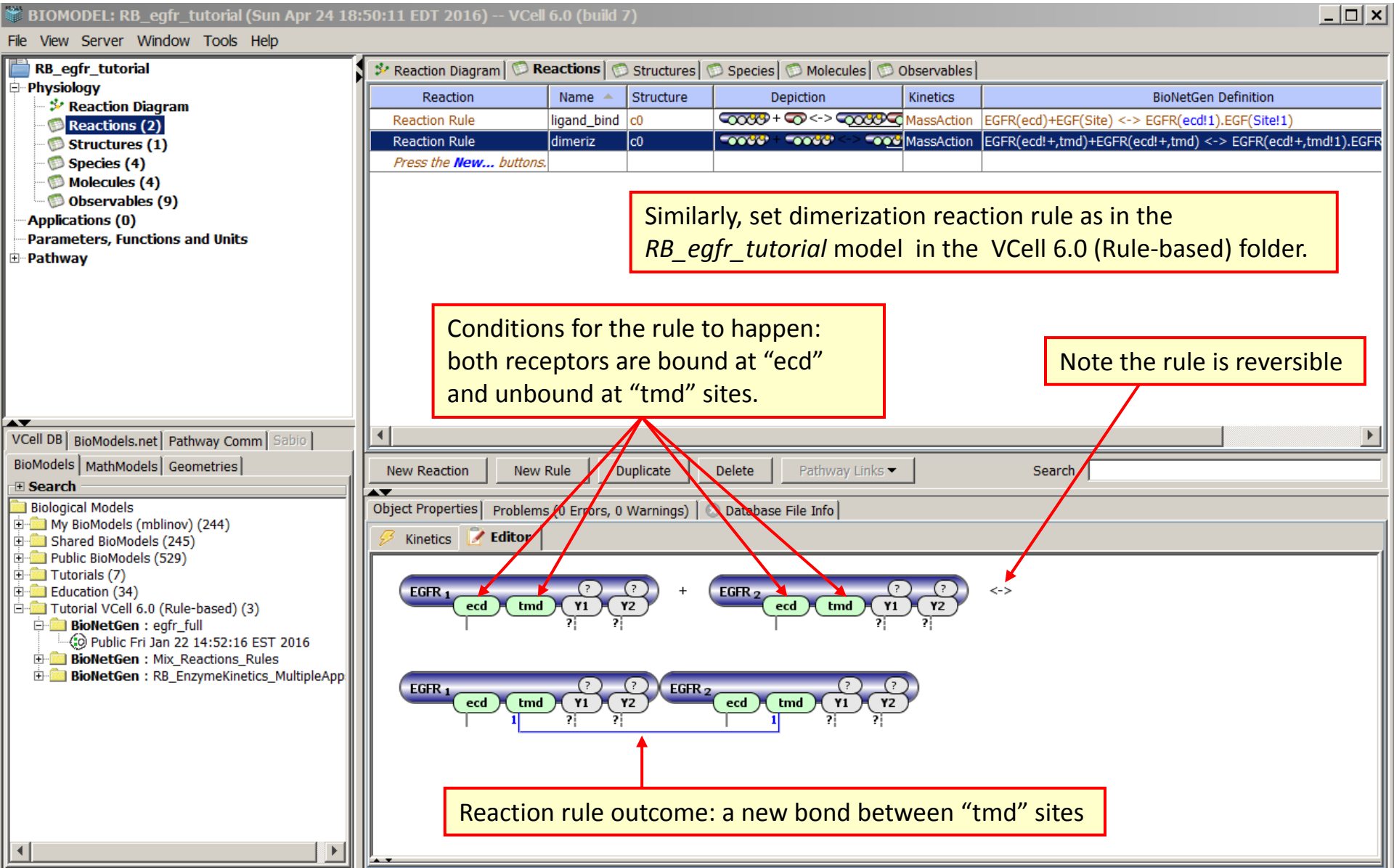


TIP: VCell has various kinetic types, but rule-based models in version 6.0 are limited to mass-action kinetic only.

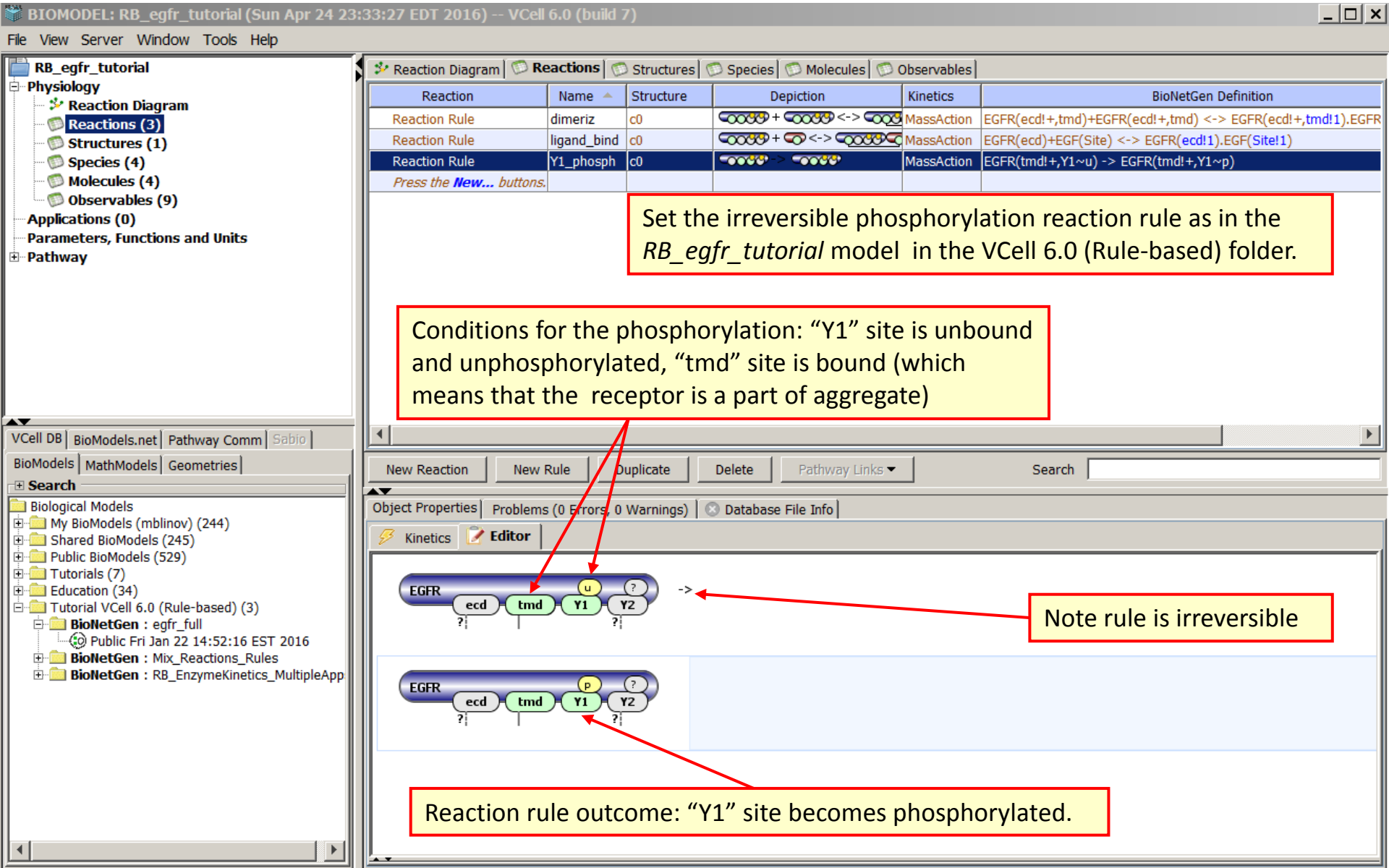


Set values in proper units. Match all values to the *RB_egfr_tutorial* model in the VCell 6.0 (Rule-based) folder.

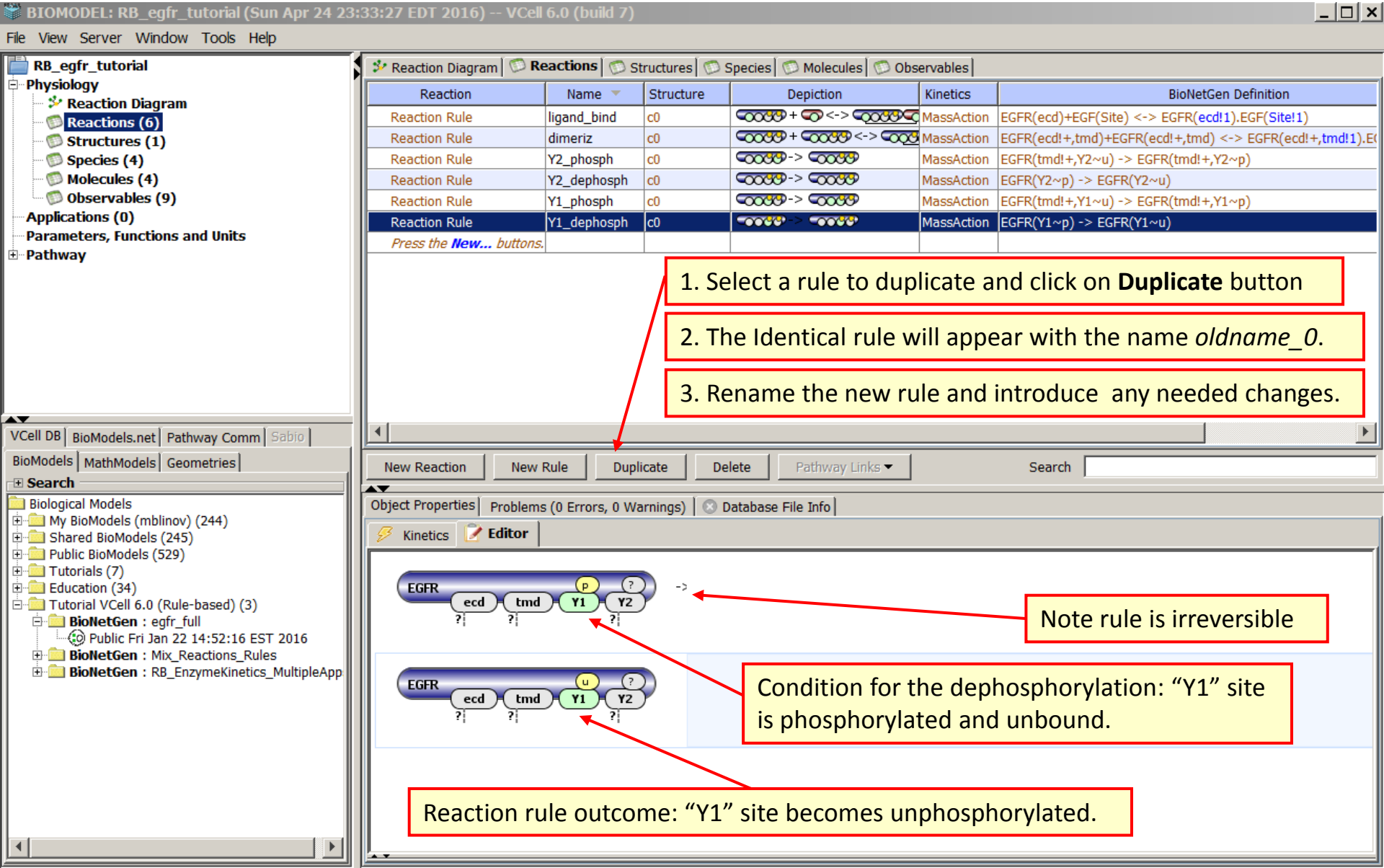
TIP: If reactants or products contain identical molecules, they are automatically numbered for the modeler's convenience, so the user can match reactants to products.



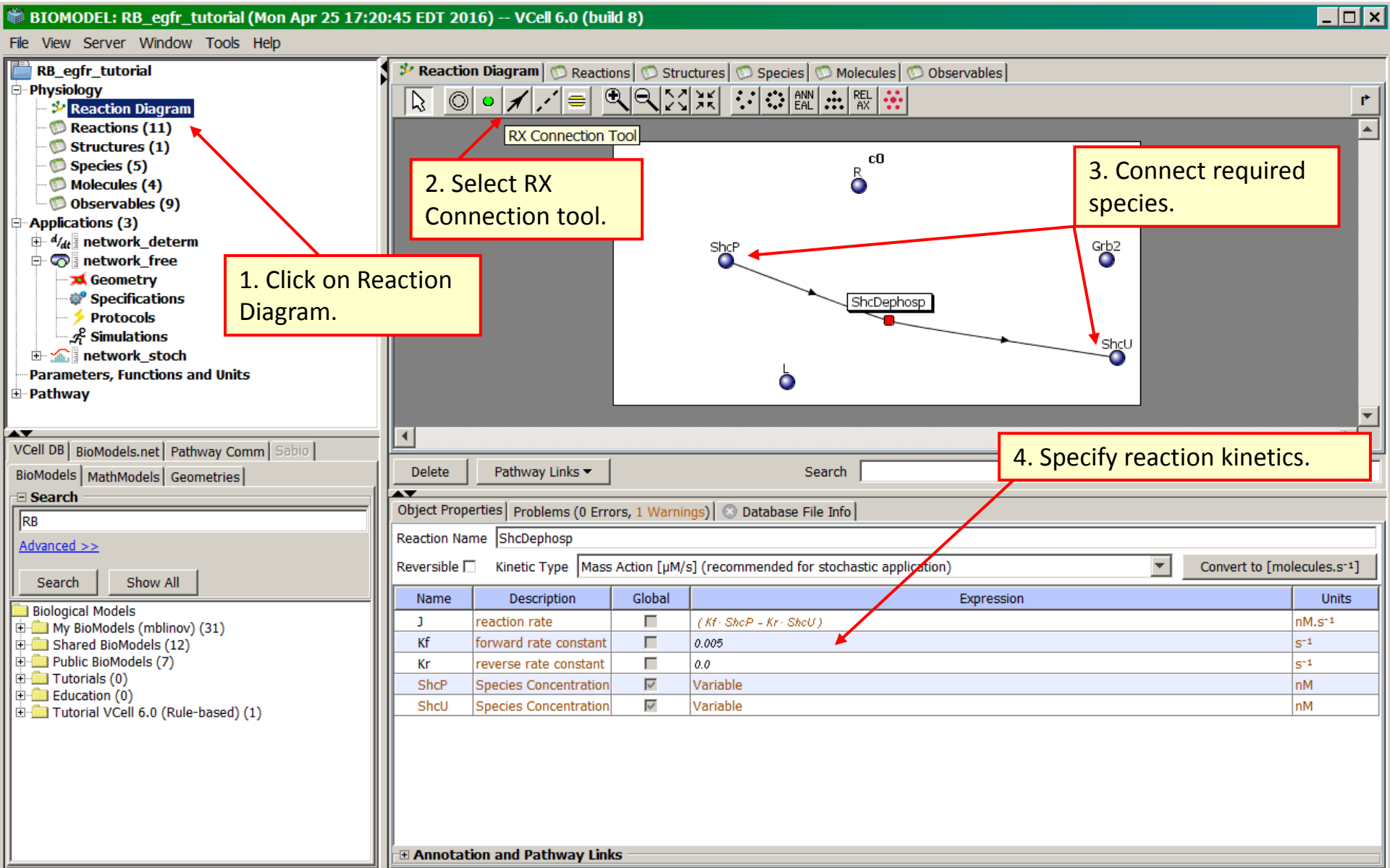
TIP: A green site with a vertical line underneath means that the site is bound, but the binding partner is not explicitly specified and can be any molecule allowable by rules.



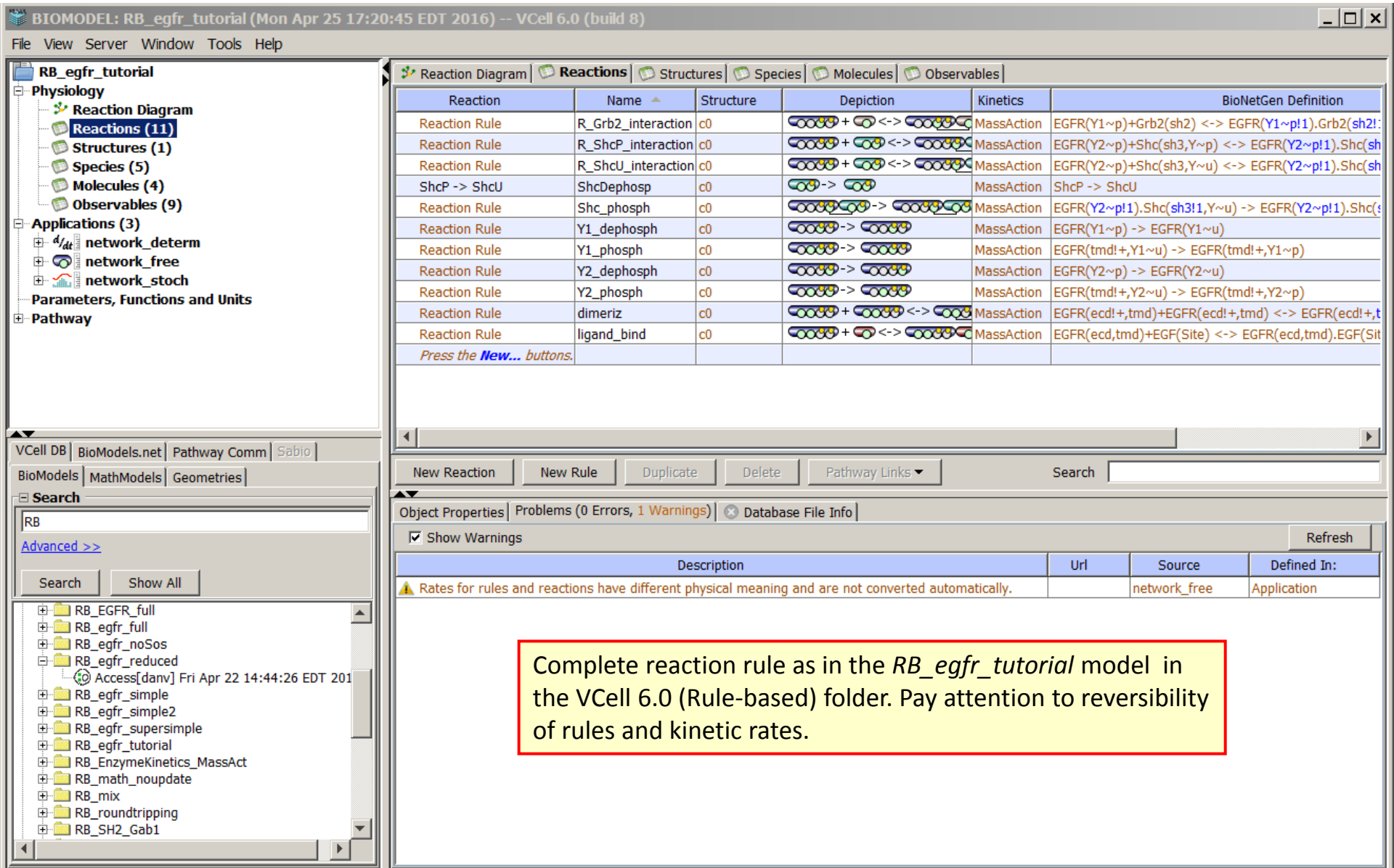
TIP: Using the **Duplicate** button can save a lot of time when a combination of multiple molecules participates in multiple reaction rules. Make sure you edit the copied rule and not the original one!



TIP: Reactions rules are not displayed in the Reaction Diagram, but species are. One can use VCell reaction tools to create non-rule based reactions among species (see other tutorials on VCell use).

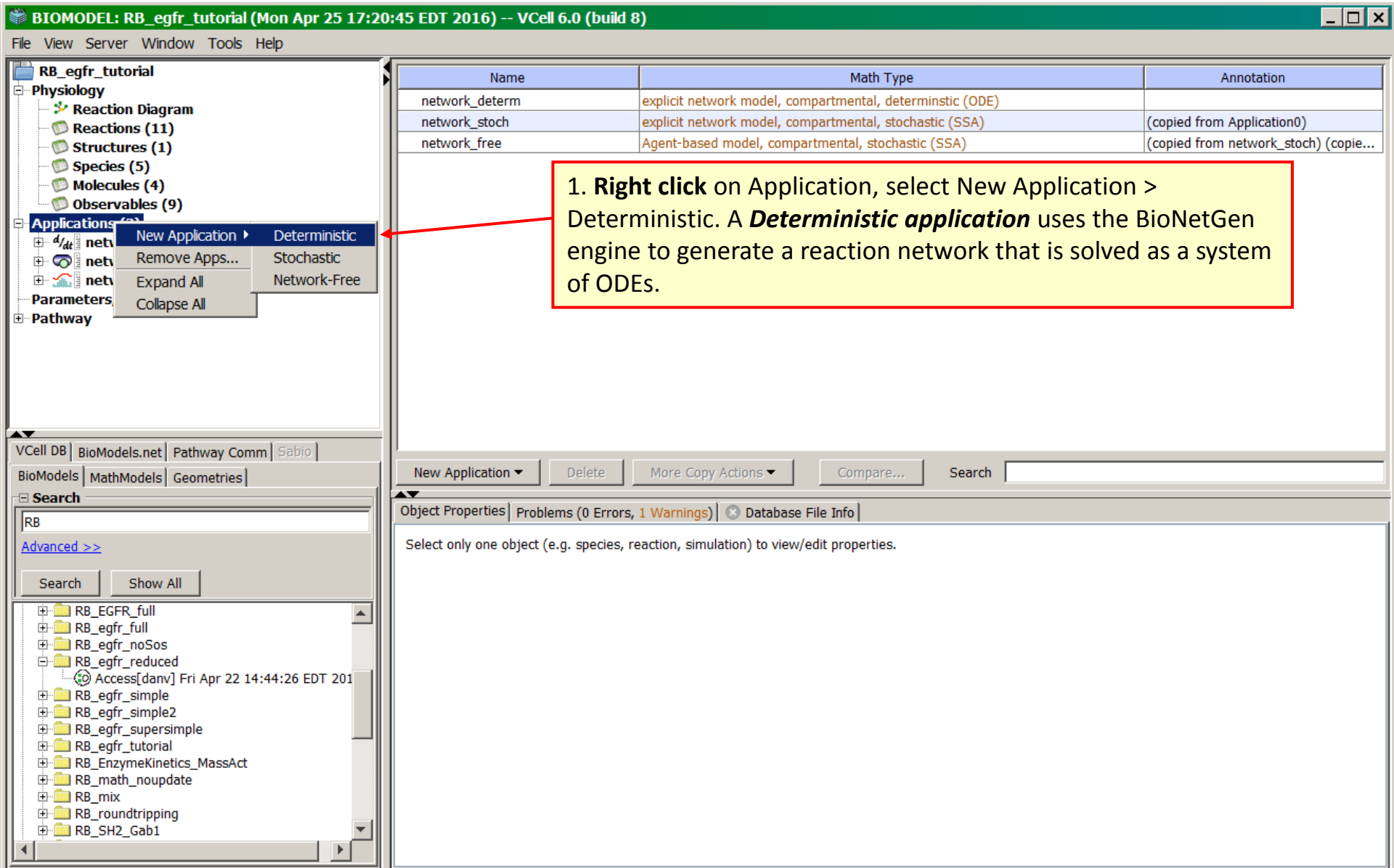


TIP: Enter a string (e.g. Molecule or Site name) in the Search field, and the table will be filtered to display only entries containing this string. You can enter any BNGL string as well.

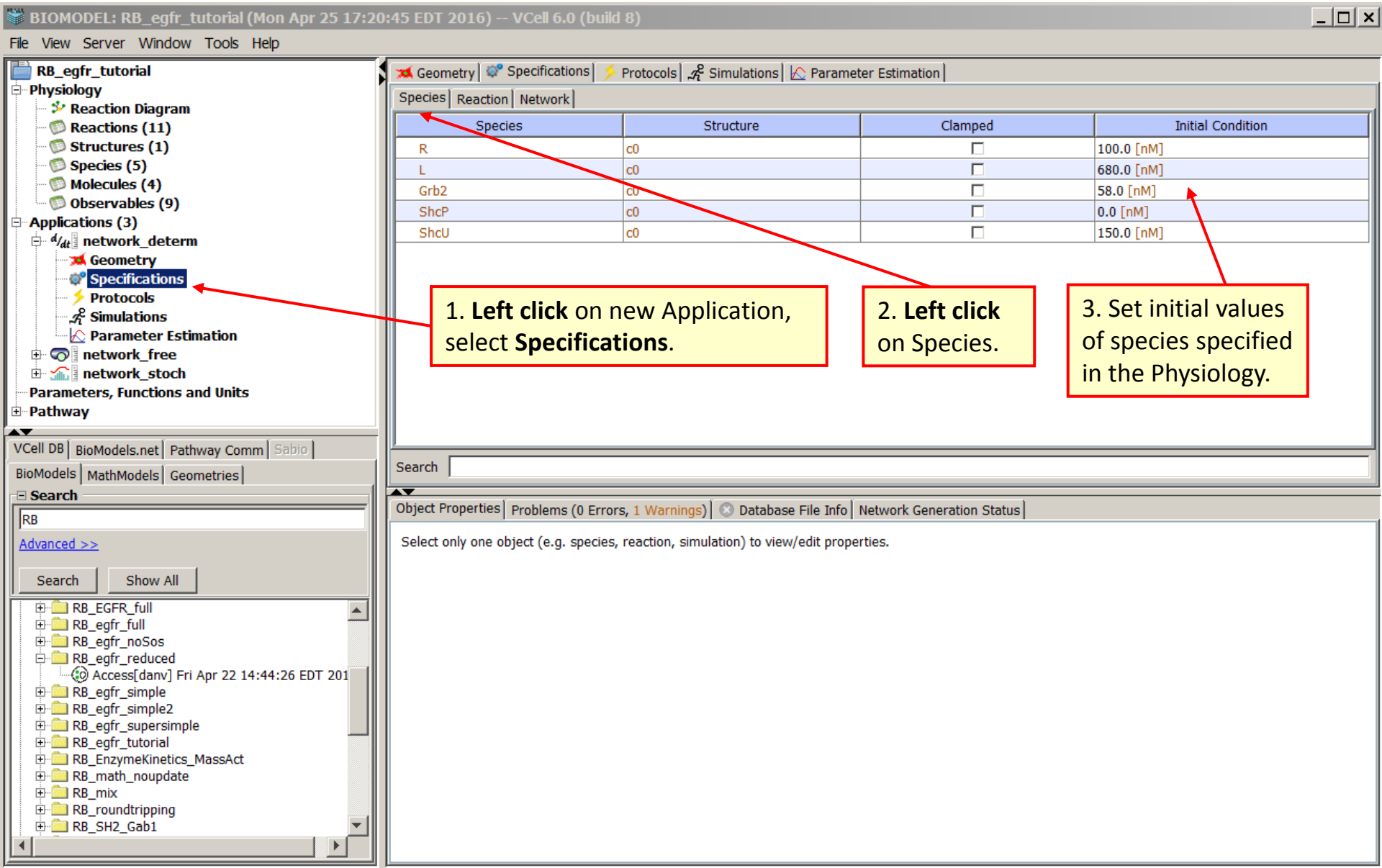


Complete reaction rule as in the *RB_egfr_tutorial* model in the VCell 6.0 (Rule-based) folder. Pay attention to reversibility of rules and kinetic rates.

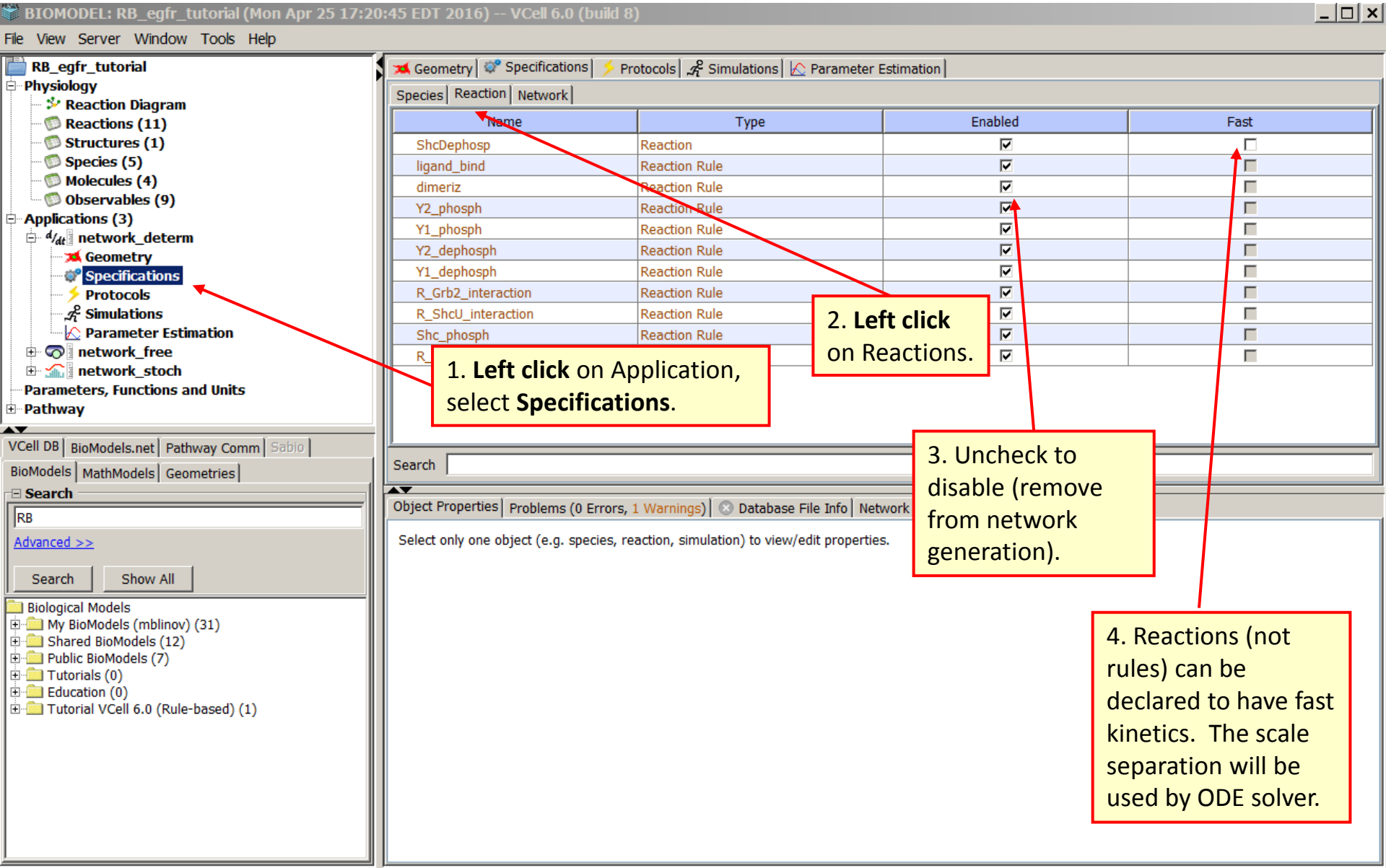
TIP: Check other VCell tutorials at http://vcell.org to learn about the use of Applications in VCell.



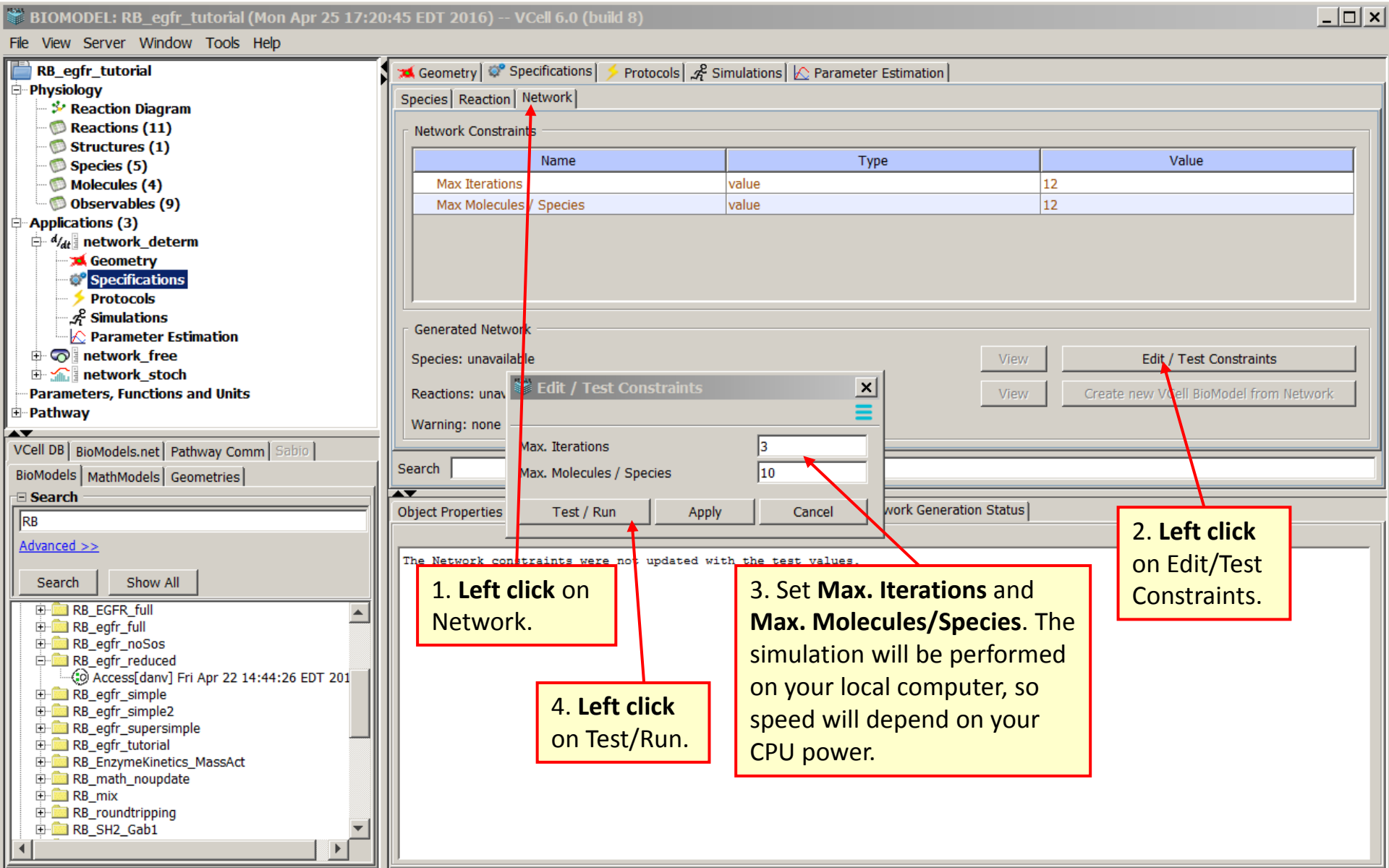
TIP: **Clamped** means that the value of species is kept constant during the simulation.



TIP: Enabling/disabling reactions is very useful for model validation: see how the network size is changing when upstream or downstream reaction rules are disabled.



TIP: Setting Max. Molecules/Species may be biologically relevant if, for example, it is known from experiments that complexes may have no more than a certain number of molecules.



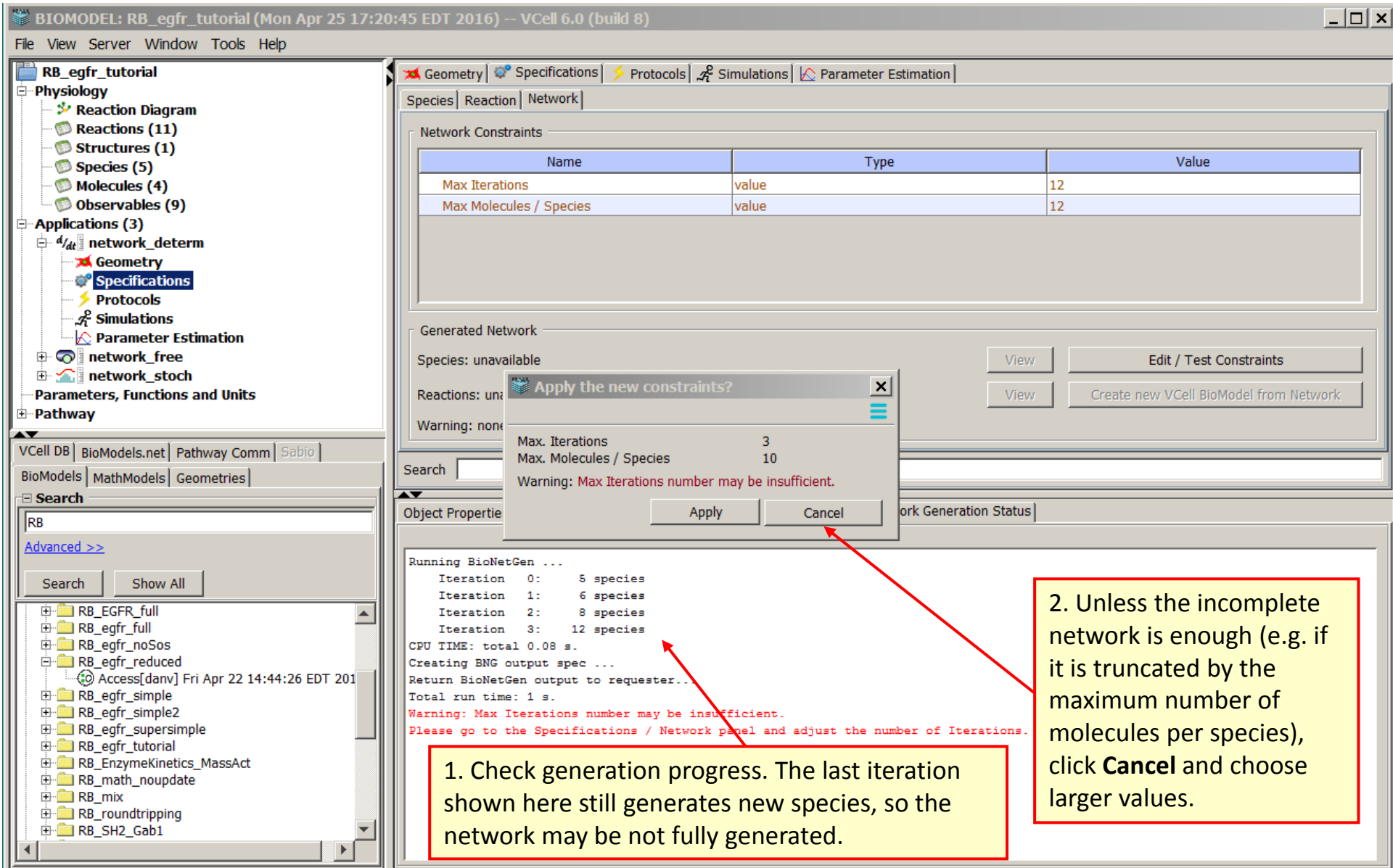
1. **Left click** on Network.

2. **Left click** on Edit/Test Constraints.

3. Set **Max. Iterations** and **Max. Molecules/Species**. The simulation will be performed on your local computer, so speed will depend on your CPU power.

4. **Left click** on Test/Run.

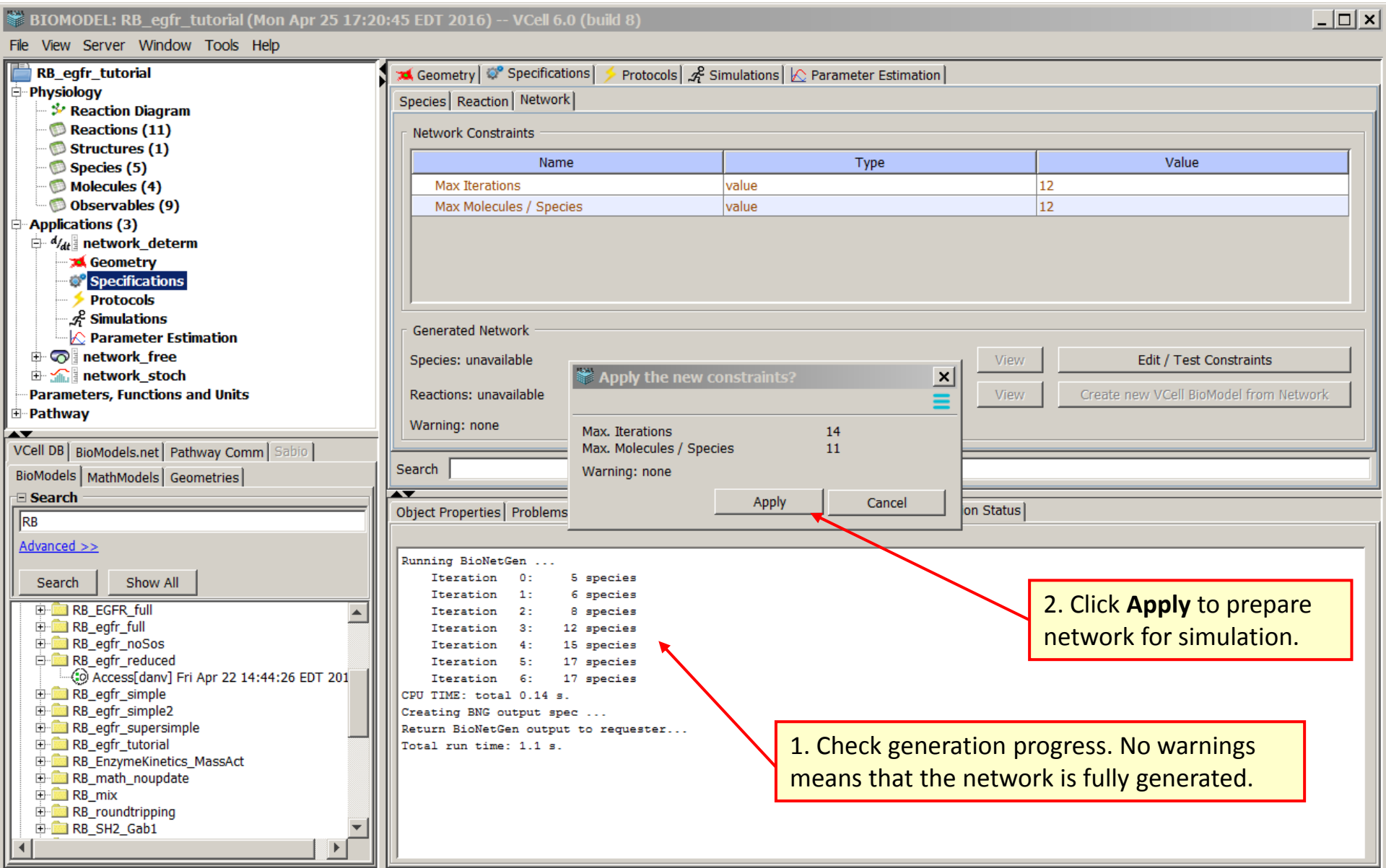
TIP: Network generation may take a long time, so the default values are set very low. Most likely, they are too low for the network to be generated fully, and you will need to increase them.



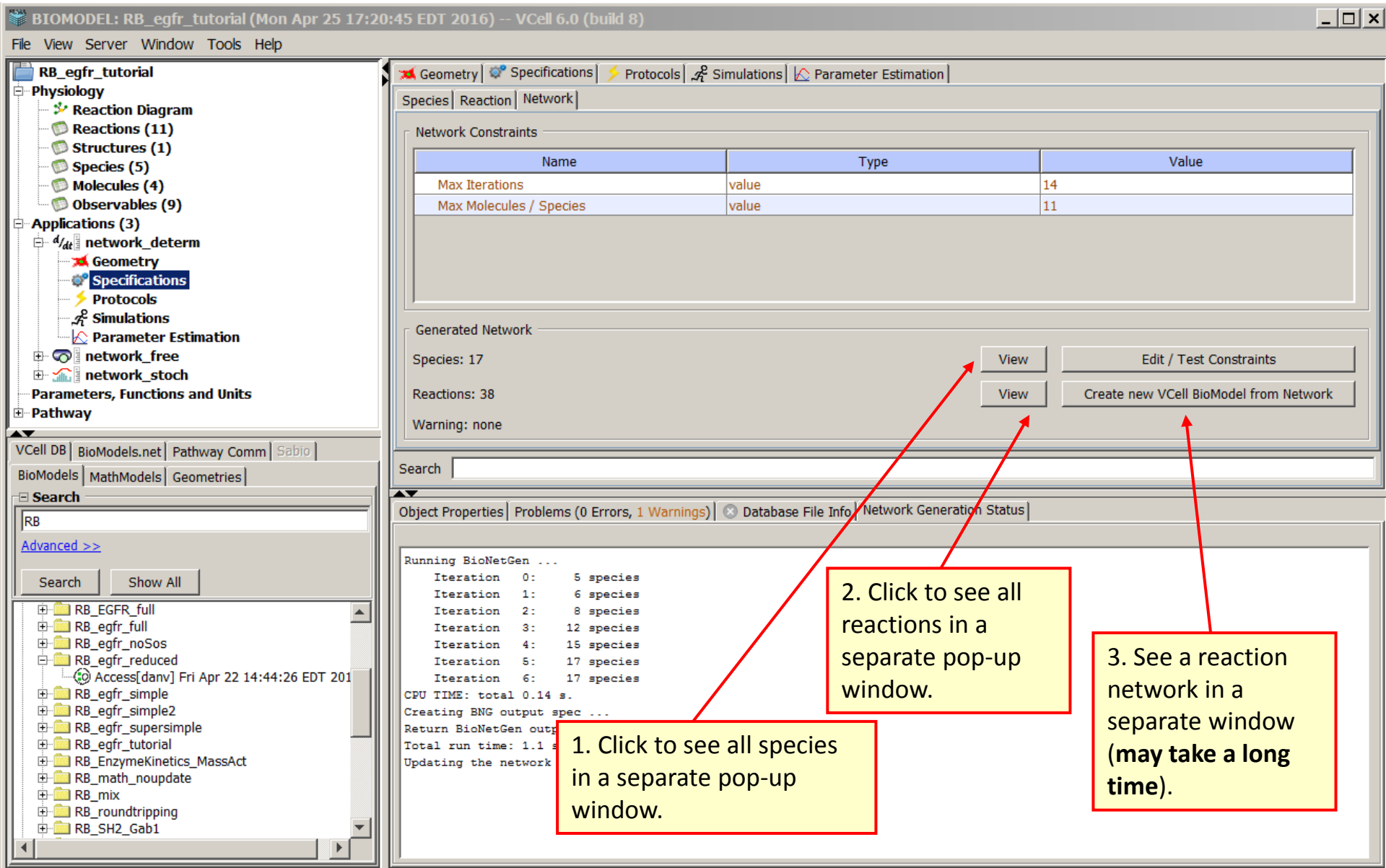
1. Check generation progress. The last iteration shown here still generates new species, so the network may be not fully generated.

2. Unless the incomplete network is enough (e.g. if it is truncated by the maximum number of molecules per species), click **Cancel** and choose larger values.

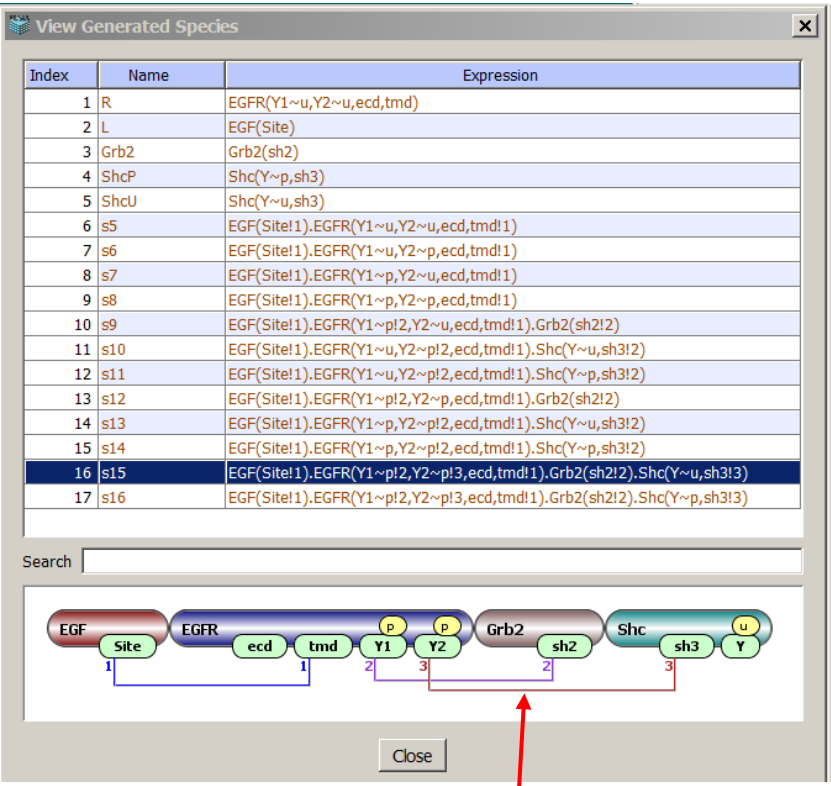
TIP: If network generation takes too long, it can be cancelled. VCell has a hard limit on the maximum number of species and reactions. If a generated network size exceeds this limit, constraints will not be applied, and the model should be adjusted to become smaller, or a ***Network-Free*** application used instead.

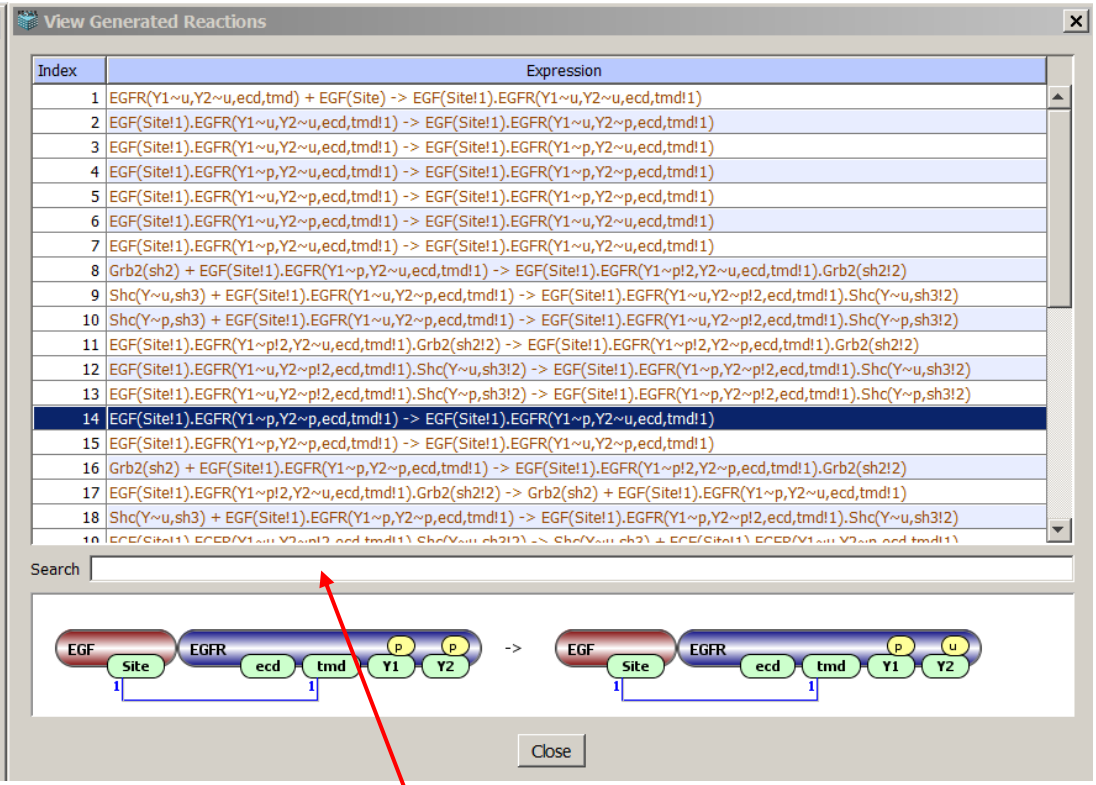


TIP: All actions on this page are optional but highly recommended to verify that the generated network contains all expected, and does not contain unexpected, species and reactions. *Creating a new BioModel may take a long time and is not recommended for large networks*.



TIP: Filtering is very useful to verify the model. If you see that names of Molecules and Sites are too generic for efficient filtering – go back and change them. This is an easy and safe procedure, but you will need to rerun network generation. After the network is verified, it can be simulated.

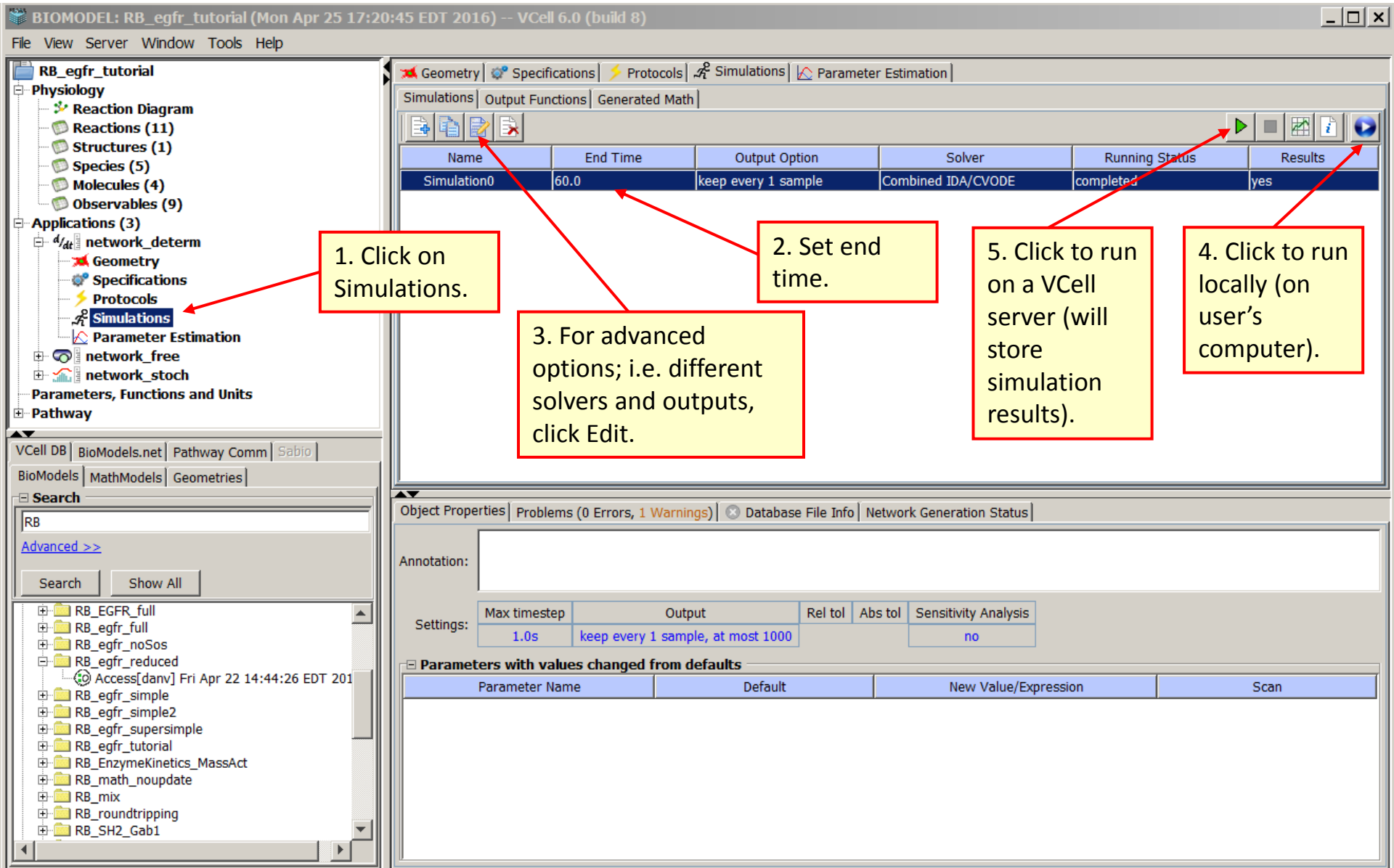




Different bonds are shown in different colors.

Species and reactions can be filtered by entering a string, e.g. Molecule or Site name, in the Search box.

TIP: Most models can be efficiently simulated locally (blue button). But if you want to save simulation results in the database for quick retrieval later on, the server simulation (green button) is recommended.

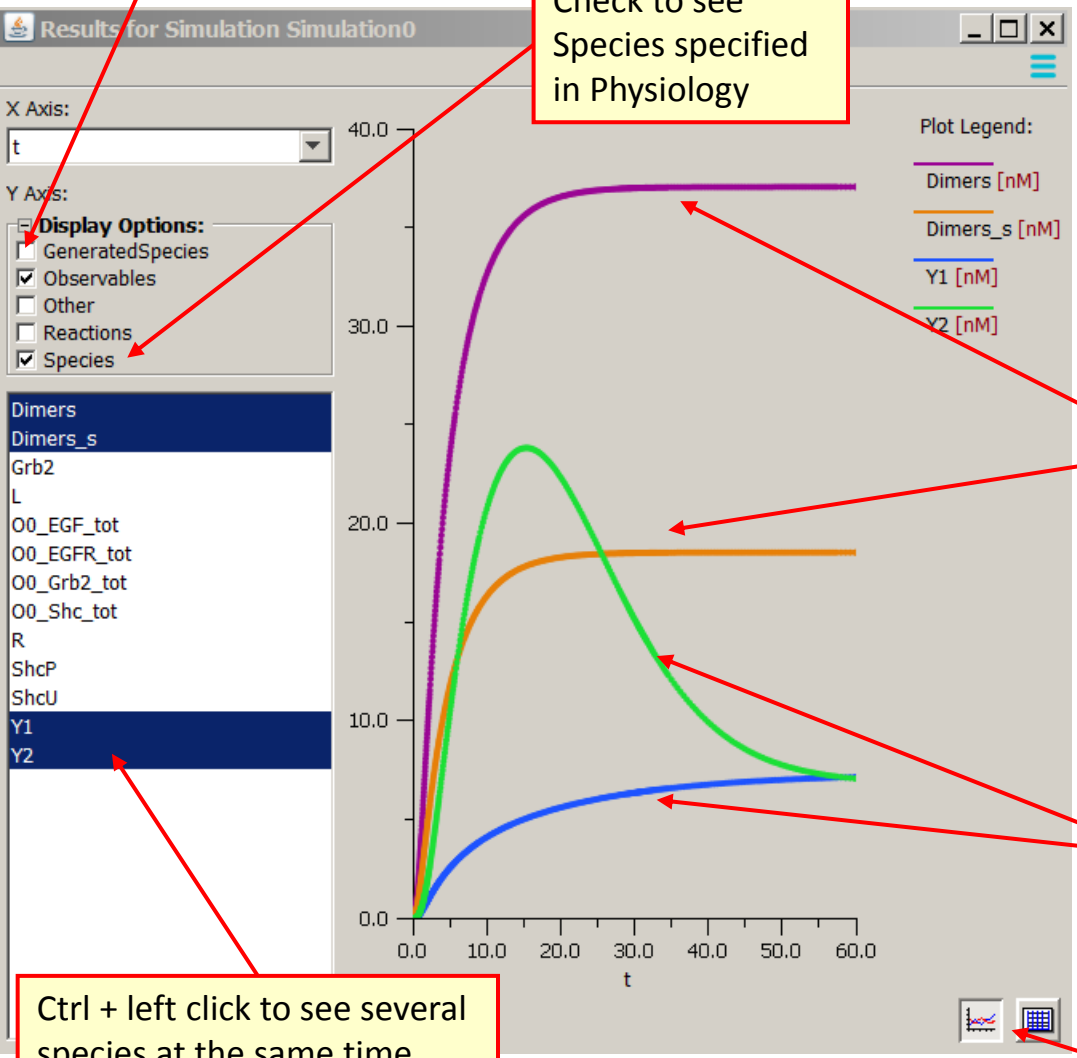


Check to view species generated by BioNetGen

Check to see Species specified in Physiology

TIP1: Generated species are listed by index (s10, s11, …). The molecular composition of species can be seen under **Specification > Network > View Species**.

TIP2: **Reactions** show fluxes through individual reactions generated by each rule.



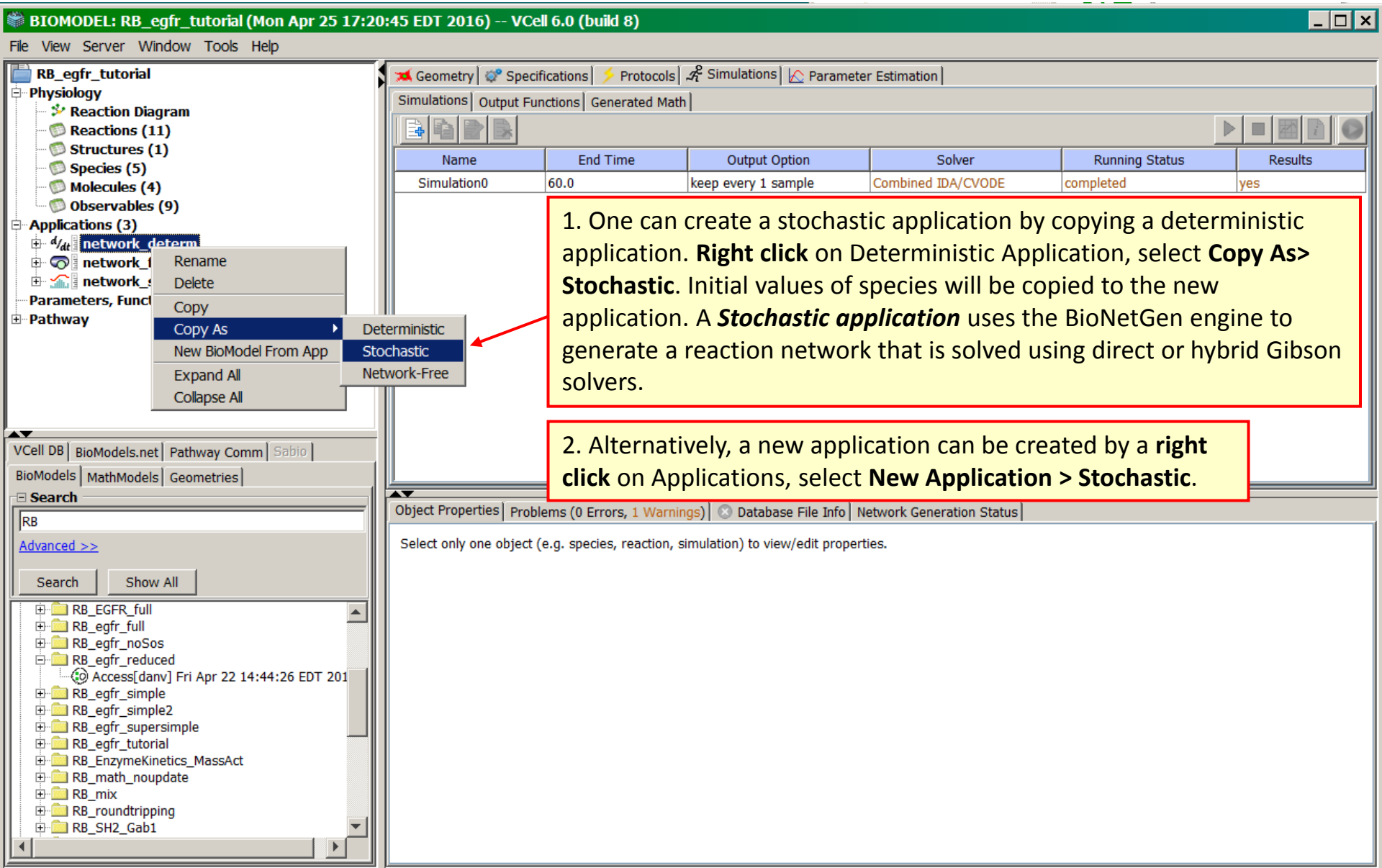
Note the difference between EGFR dimers counted as molecules and as species

The difference between “Y1” and “Y2” phosphorylation timecourses is due to Shc phosphorylation.

Ctrl + left click to see several species at the same time.

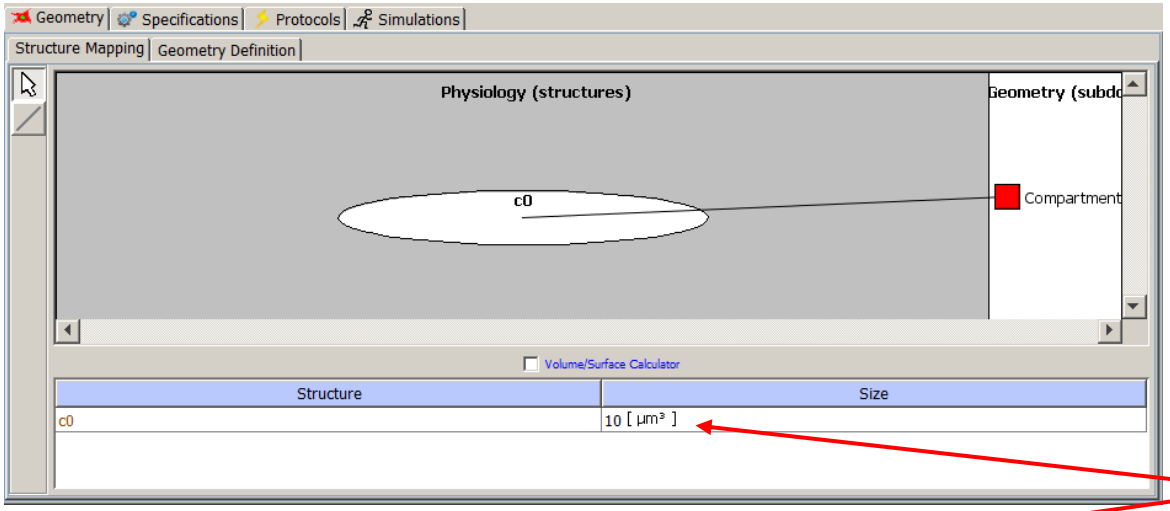
Click to see numerical values

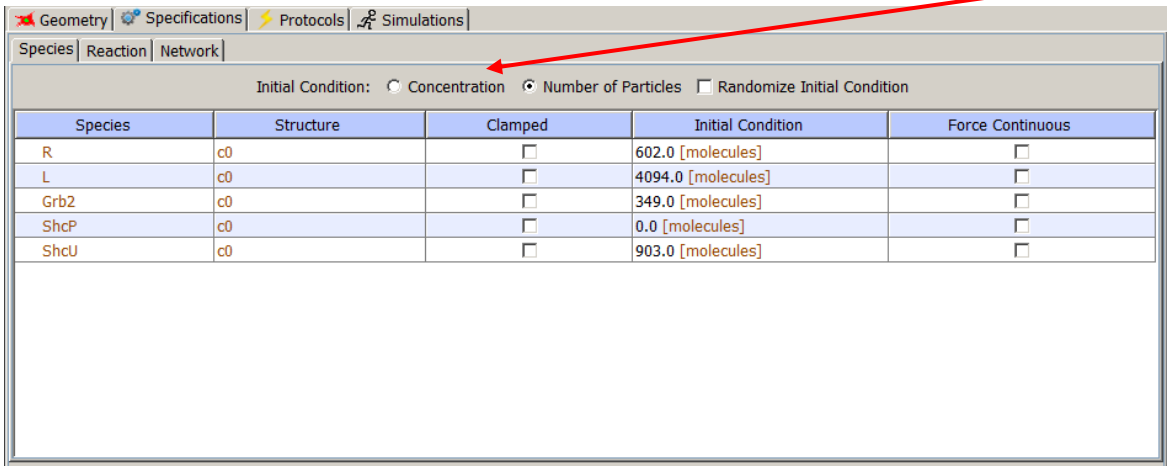
TIP: A stochastic application is recommended when the number of particles is low, and a deterministic simulation (using concentrations) may miss noise and fluctuations. It uses the same network generated by BioNetGen.



TIP1: If the model was defined in concentrations, concentrations are converted into particle numbers using the volumes specified under Geometry. The default size is 5000 um3 (average cell size), so the number of particles will be exceedingly large. You need to decrease Size to a small simulation volume.

TIP2: To keep concentrations fixed, check "Concentration" before switching to Geometry and changing its Size.





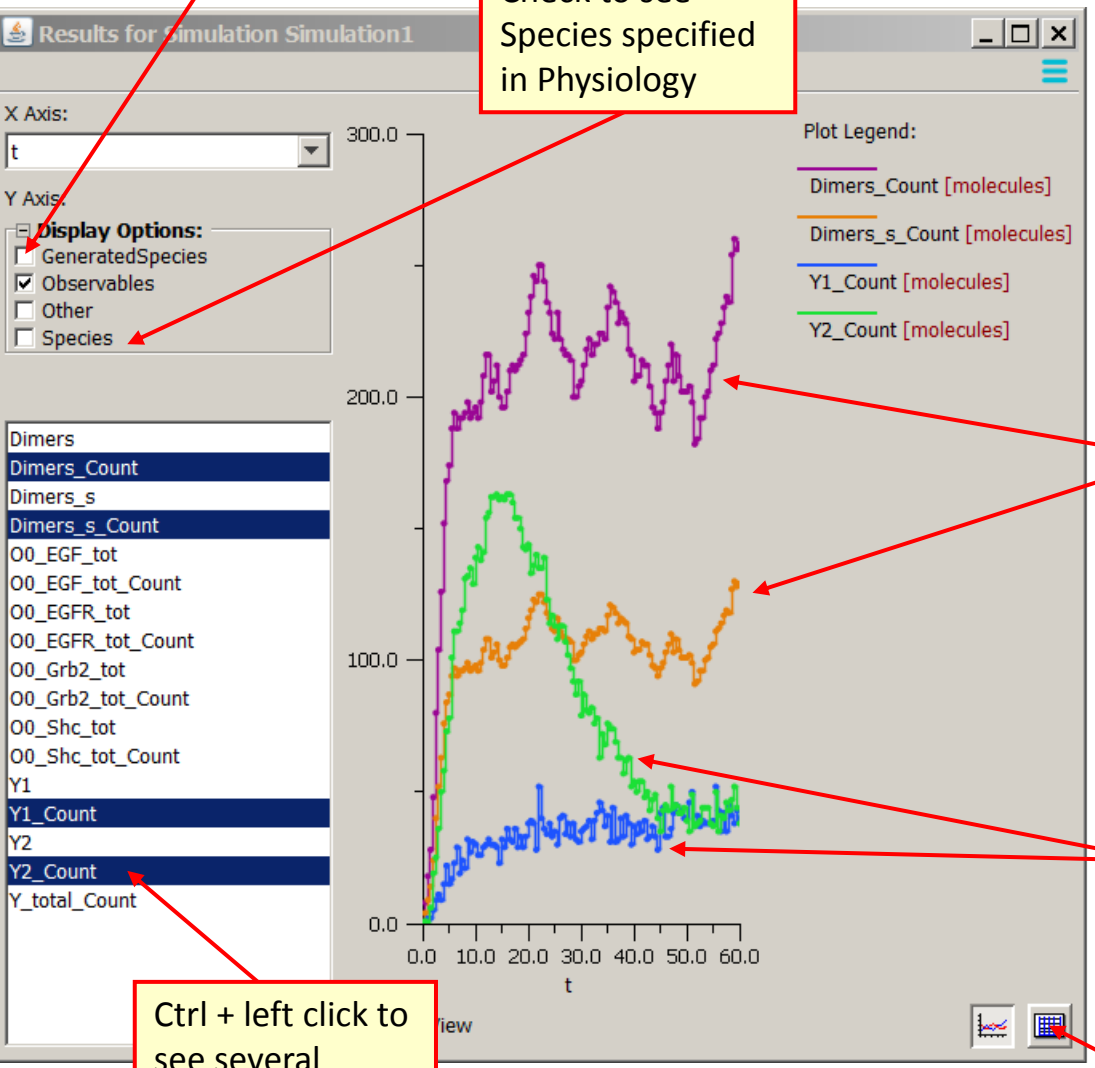
Switching back and forth between **Geometry > Structure Mapping** and **Specifications > Species**, make sure your simulation volume is sufficiently small, so that for given concentrations the number of particles is small enough for stochastic simulations.

Check to see species generated by BioNetGen

Check to see Species specified in Physiology

TIP1: Every species and observable is presented in two units – concentrations (to compare to deterministic results) and molecules (displayed with **_Count** appendix).

TIP2: Select **Other** to view show reaction rates (as Kf_…) and reaction firing events (as P_...) per second for each individual reaction generated by each rule.



Note the difference between EGFR dimers counted as molecules and as species

The difference between “Y1” and “Y2” phosphorylation timecourses is due to Shc phosphorylation.

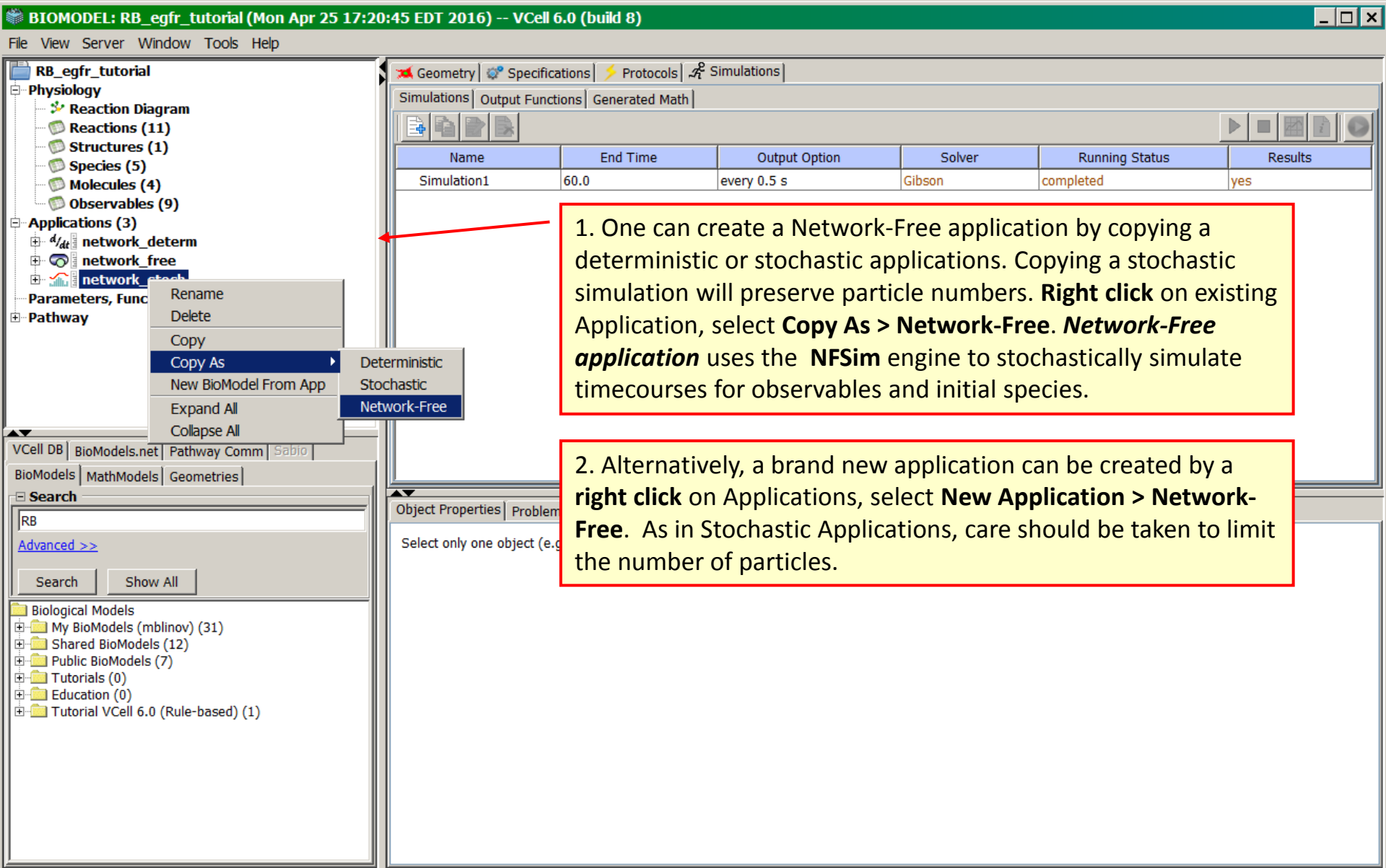
Ctrl + left click to see several species at once

Click to see numerical values

Rule-Based Tutorial VCell 6.0: Network-Free Application

Contents

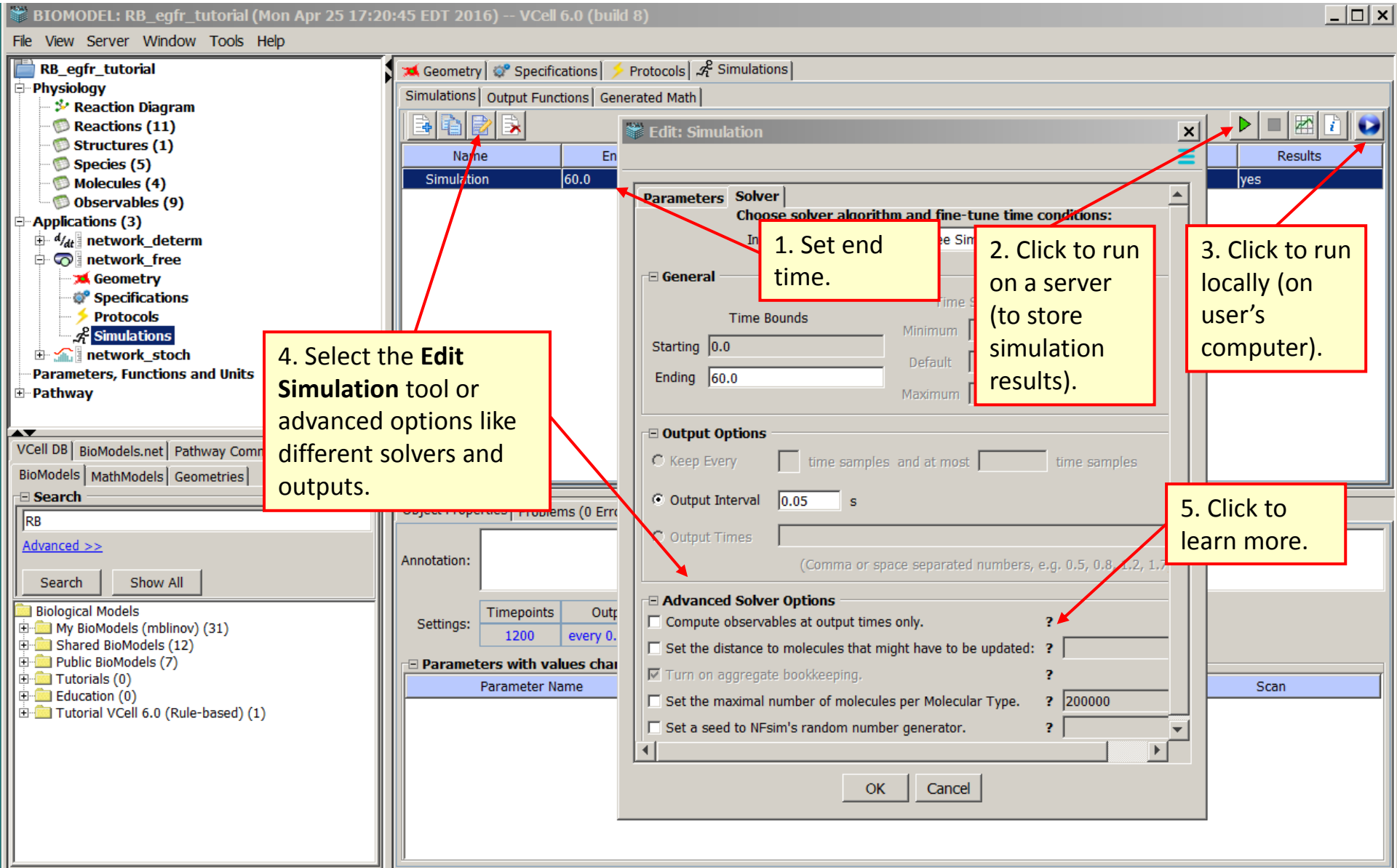
TIP: A Network-Free application simulates timecourses for observables without network generation. If the network size is too large or infinite, it is the only way to compute observables. However, individual species are not visible. To check whether a specific species is populated, it can be added to the list of Observables.



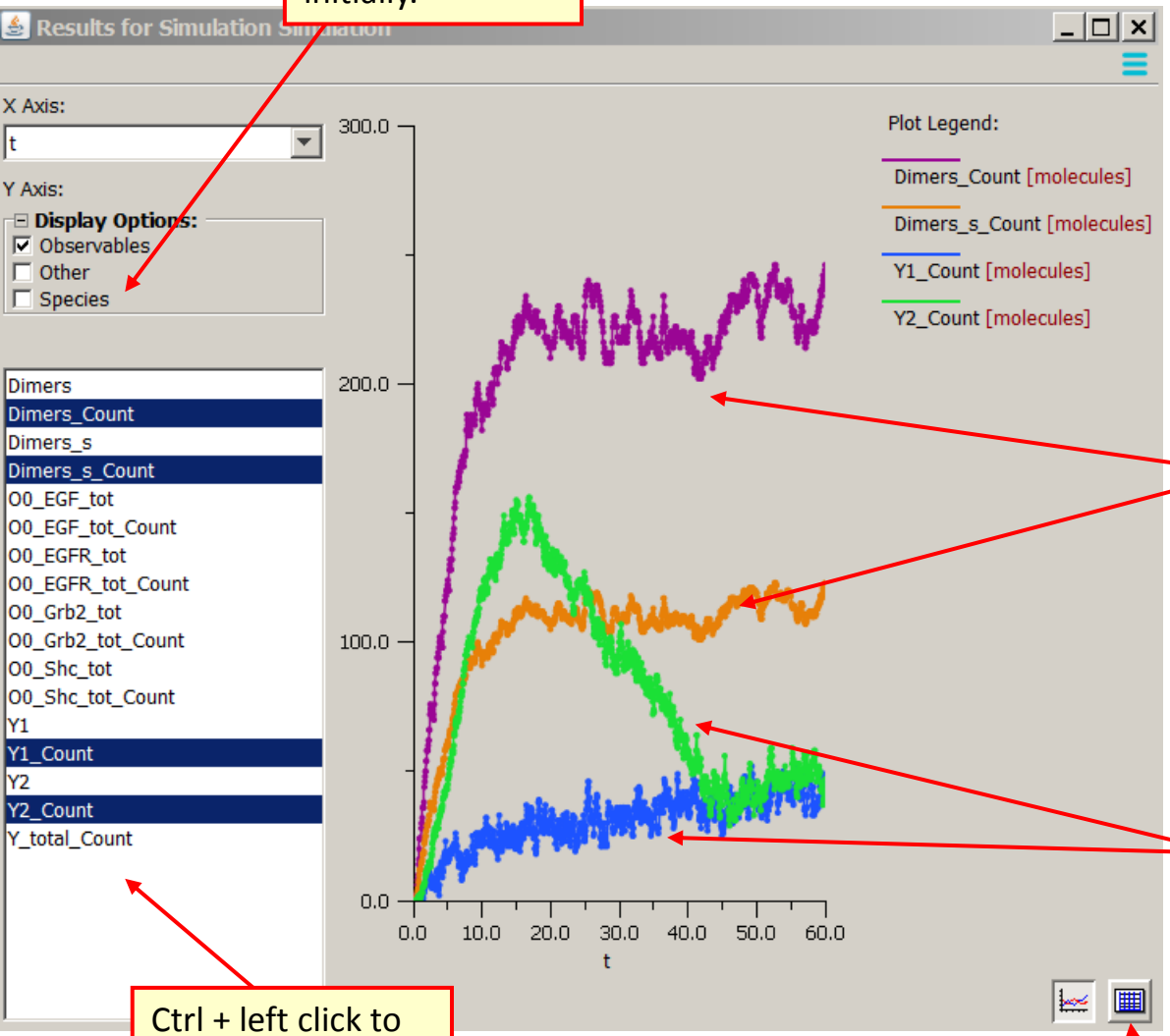
1. One can create a Network-Free application by copying a deterministic or stochastic applications. Copying a stochastic simulation will preserve particle numbers. **Right click** on existing Application, select **Copy As > Network-Free**. ***Network-Free application*** uses the **NFSim** engine to stochastically simulate timecourses for observables and initial species.

2. Alternatively, a brand new application can be created by a **right click** on Applications, select **New Application > Network-Free**. As in Stochastic Applications, care should be taken to limit the number of particles.

TIP: The NFSim engine has a large number of fine-tuning options. Generally, default options should be sufficient to simulate most models. If necessary, click on Edit. Options are documented under ? and in the Help menu.



Select to list Species defined initially.



TIP: Generally, deterministic, stochastic and NFSim simulation results should be similar (given noise and fluctuations). If NFSim results are very different from results from a network, it may mean that the network is truncated and *not exhaustively generated.*

See the difference between EGFR dimers counted as molecules and as species

The difference between “Y1” and “Y2” phosphorylations timecourses is due to Shc phosphorylation.

Ctrl + left click to see several species at once.

Click to see numerical values