

Senators champion research agencies in budget plea to Clinton

[WASHINGTON] Twenty-four US Senators have called for President Bill Clinton to include more money for research agencies in his budget request for fiscal year 2000, which he is expected to present to the Congress on 1 February next year.

The bipartisan group wrote to Clinton on 11 December, expressing "concerns" about the plans of the White House Office of Management and Budget, currently completing the budget request. Early in December, science lobbyists warned that the office was considering very small increases next year for science agencies, because they had fared so well in this year's budget.

The senators pointed out that the Senate has passed the Federal Research Investment Act — an advisory measure which has not been considered yet by the House of Representatives — which would double research spending over 12 years.

Europe's Mars mission heads for drawing board

[MUNICH] The Mars Express mission of the European Space Agency (ESA) looks almost

certain to fly following the agency's decision last week to begin a detailed design phase. The mission is scheduled for launch in 2003.

ESA has been encouraged by the agreement of its council last week to provide an extra ECU3 million (US\$3.5 million) for the 1999 space science budget by reorganizing internal funds. But the council deferred to next May's ESA ministerial meeting the decision on the total funding for the mandatory science programme, which has been eroded over the past three years.

Cesarsky tipped to head Euro observatory

[MUNICH] French astrophysicist Catherine Cesarsky (below) is being hotly tipped as the next director of the European Southern Observatory in Garching, near Munich, to take over from Riccardo Giacconi next year.

Cesarsky is director of fundamental science at France's atomic energy research organization (CEA), and principal investigator of one of the main scientific instruments that flew on the European Space Agency's Infrared Space Observatory.



Another record year for global temperatures

[WASHINGTON] Average global temperatures were higher this year than in any year since record keeping began in 1860, the World Meteorological Organization reported last week. Based on observations up to mid-December, the organization estimates that the global mean surface temperature for 1998 — as measured by a network of ships, buoys and land-based weather stations — will be 0.58 °C above the average temperature for the years 1961 to 1990.

The previous warmest year, 1997, was 0.43 °C above the recent average. The 1990s have seen seven of the ten warmest years since the mid-nineteenth century.

'Water with a memory' protocols go public

[PARIS] Scientists have been offered an opportunity to attempt to reproduce the experiments of French scientist Jacques Benveniste, who claims to have shown that water has 'memory', and to be able to transmit biological activities to water or cultured cells electronically, to store such signals on computer disks, and to send them over the Internet (see *Nature* 389, 427; 1997).

A website created by Benveniste's

company, Digibio, offers to provide full protocols. "We wish to demonstrate, with the participation of as many laboratories world-wide as possible, the existence of biological activity in a solution so diluted that the number of physical molecules is too low to otherwise induce an effect," says Benveniste (see <http://www.digibio.com>).

British universities back interdisciplinary work

[LONDON] A survey of 2,500 British researchers has found no evidence of systematic bias against interdisciplinary research in the government's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The survey, commissioned by the higher education funding councils, concludes that there is therefore no need for major structural changes to the next RAE scheduled for 2001.

Preliminary results from the survey, released at the beginning of the month, show that interdisciplinary research is widespread in British universities, involving three out of four respondents. Eighty-three per cent of heads of departments surveyed felt that overall the RAE has "little effect". But the report concludes that there is a need to strengthen the way that panels assess research quality, particularly in split and 'cross-refereed' departments.

Japan's spacecraft starts long trek to Mars



[TOKYO] Japan's first Mars probe, Nozomi — the Japanese for 'hope' — left the elliptical orbit around Earth 170 days after its launch, to begin its 700 million kilometre journey towards Mars. It is scheduled to enter the Martian atmosphere next October.

Japan's Institute of Space and Astronautical Science announced on Monday (21 December) that Nozomi had been propelled into high orbit. Nozomi will investigate the atmosphere of Mars.

High-tech companies rank skills top priority

[LONDON] Sixty-five per cent of respondents to a survey of British high-technology companies have said that the availability of a

skilled workforce is the most important factor in their decision to locate at a particular place. Proximity to strategic markets, good schools and research facilities were also seen as important.

The survey of 127 life science, telecommunications and information technology companies was conducted by the legal firm Taylor Joynson Garrett and the London Business School. It reveals that more than 40 per cent of small life science and information technology companies have not taken steps to protect the intellectual property rights produced from research.

Canada and Europe broaden research pact

[LONDON] All of the Canadian government's non-defence science and technology activities have been opened up to participation by researchers from member states of the European Union. An agreement signed in Ottawa last week applies to any work funded or performed by government departments or agencies.

In return, Canadian researchers will be able to participate in all areas of the union's fifth Framework programme, which starts next year, although they will have to fund their own work. The deal broadens the scope of an agreement signed in February 1996.