

## British government responds to worries over BSE in sheep

[PARIS] The British government and farming organizations moved swiftly this week to play down concerns over the risk that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) may have passed to sheep and become endemic. Their action followed publication of a news article in last week's *Nature* (395, 6–7; 1998), which reported that only nine sheep had been tested for BSE, and that the UK Department of Health had refused a proposal from the Consumers' Association to advise parents against feeding lamb to children.

In a statement, Sir Kenneth Calman, Britain's chief medical officer, said the government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee had advised that there was no new evidence of BSE in sheep, and concluded that no further health precautions were needed.

The health department said that "the government recognized that parents will be concerned about risks to their children, and will often choose to reduce them below a level they would accept for themselves". The Consumers' Association said that "the handling by the government of the BSE in sheep issue is exactly the situation that we wished to avoid," in that the public statements made were "unhelpful to consumers".

Ben Gill, the president of the National Farmers' Union, attacked the open discussion of the issue as "scaremongering". There is "no news here," he said, describing it as "an old story resurrected by *Nature*".

## Science policy in flux in New Zealand

[SYDNEY] Science has lost political status in New Zealand following the downgrading in cabinet rank of Maurice Williamson, minister for research, science and technology, during a reshuffle. This comes at a time when the government is facing criticism from New Zealand scientists over shrinking funds and a radical plan to change priorities for ministry research grants (*Nature* 393, 198; 1998).

Williamson has also been appointed assistant to education minister Wyatt Creech, where he is expected to take over responsibility for universities. The move has led to speculation that the research ministry will be merged with the more powerful ministries of education or commerce.

Creech, who has been appointed Deputy Prime Minister, maintains control over the delayed White Paper on Tertiary Education (*Nature* 392, 320; 1998), which is expected to make controversial changes to funding formulae. Under fierce debate are whether

universities will be ranked for quality and their researchers made to compete for grants, and how research by graduate students will be supported.

## UK to consider offshore wind energy investment

[LONDON] British energy minister John Battle last week announced plans to investigate developing offshore wind energy, as part of the government's drive to achieve 10 per cent of the United Kingdom's electricity needs from renewable sources by 2010.

Offshore wind is one of the United Kingdom's greatest natural and pollution-free resources, and is as yet untapped, said Battle. But he added that the contribution it could make would depend "primarily on the environmental acceptability of offshore wind projects and the technology's cost in comparison to other renewables".

Greenpeace welcomed Battle's announcement. But its own report, published during the summer, concludes that offshore wind alone could generate more than 10 per cent of Britain's electricity needs by 2010 and 40 per cent by 2030.

## No need for thyroid screening, says report

[WASHINGTON] A US report released last week has recommended against widespread screening for thyroid cancers possibly caused by radioactive fallout from Cold War nuclear tests.

The report by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), *Exposure of the American People to Iodine-131 From Nevada Nuclear-Bomb Tests*, analyses a study by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) released last year, which suggested that 10,000 to 75,000 additional thyroid cancers may have resulted from above-ground tests in the 1950s (see *Nature* 389, 534; 1997).

The IOM/NAS report says widespread screening to try to identify such cancers is unwarranted because of the difficulty of measuring individual disease risk and the small number of cancers, which it put closer to the low end of the NCI's estimate. Instead it recommended public education to help those at high risk identify themselves.

## Russian scientists prepare to fight for pay

[MOSCOW] Russian scientists have at last started to get their July salaries, now that about half of the promised Rubl 535 million for salaries has been transferred to scientific organizations. But August salaries are rumoured to be reduced by 15 per cent – and scientists are taking action.

Because of the fall in the ruble, the salaries

of Russian scientists are worth only a quarter of their value in September 1995, the last time salaries were raised.

The Russian committee of the scientific collectives (RCSC), which unites the trade unions of science workers, has sent a telegram to president Boris Yeltsin and the acting prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, drawing their attention to the "catastrophic situation" in science and demanding that salaries be paid in full.

If the RCSC gets no satisfactory reply, it plans a series of protests during September. These will culminate in a blockade of three highways leading to the capital and an all-Russia protest organized by the federation of independent trade unions on 7 October.

## Five scientists killed in SwissAir 111 crash

[WASHINGTON] Jonathan Mann, founding director of the World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS, and his wife Mary-Lou Clements-Mann, an AIDS-vaccine researcher, were among at least five scientists killed when a SwissAir flight from New York to Geneva crashed off Nova Scotia last week.

Eugenia Spanopoulou, an immunologist and Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, was also on board the flight, along with her husband and child.

Two European physicists working at the Brookhaven National Laboratory were also killed in the crash — Klaus Kinder-Geiger, a nuclear physicist from Germany, and Per Spanne, a Swedish guest at Brookhaven from the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility at Grenoble in France.

## NIH budget boost wins Senate committee OK

[WASHINGTON] A key committee of the US Senate last week unanimously approved a \$2 billion boost in spending on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1999.

In the approved spending bill, for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, the NIH will receive \$15.6 billion, a 14.7 per cent increase over the 1998 level. The bill preserves the bulk of the social programmes that had been cut in a corresponding House of Representatives bill (see *Nature* 394, 108; 1998).

The bill could reach the Senate floor as soon as this week, after which it must be reconciled with a House bill that includes a 9.1 per cent NIH increase, to \$14.9 billion. Both houses must pass a final, reconciled bill before the 1999 fiscal year begins on 1 October.

The Senate Appropriations Committee's bill directs that \$175 million be spent by NIH on prostate cancer research — nearly doubling the \$89.5 million now spent.