

Engineered foods not 'organic', says US agriculture department

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Agriculture has decided to exclude genetically engineered and irradiated foods from the designation 'organic', it was reported last week.

The department had previously proposed a definition of 'organic' that did not exclude these foods. But during a four-month comment period that ended last week, it received some 150,000 communications from the public, most vociferously opposing their inclusion.

Even the agricultural giant Monsanto argued against including genetically engineered foods. A final definition is expected from the department by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Britain's Vegetarian Society, which has been criticized for allowing its logo indicating approval to be used on foods containing genetically modified soya, is coming under pressure from the producers of 'natural' foods to modify its stance. One critic argued last week that the society had been 'duped' into approving such soya, which can be used as an alternative to meat.

Euro parliament holds out for more Framework cash

[MUNICH] The European Parliament is likely to reject the European council of research ministers' proposal for financing the fifth Framework programme of research (FP5), which should be adopted in the autumn and run for five years.

Council and parliament disagree strongly about the level of financing of FP5 which the council, following a meeting in February, wants restricted to ECU14 billion (US\$15.6 billion). After its first reading, parliament had asked for ECU16.7 billion.

Parliament's research committee is due to discuss proposed amendments to the council's proposal on 20 May, in preparation for a second reading in parliament at the beginning of June. It is likely to hold out for a minimum of ECU15 billion.

Competition to launch French start-ups

[PARIS] A competition to help young scientists to create high-technology start-up companies has been started by the Rhône Poulenc Foundation, a charity set up by the company Rhône Poulenc under the auspices of the Institut de France. Ten so-called 'springboard' projects will be selected annually by a jury chaired by Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, the 1991 Nobel prizewinner in physics.

Each winner will receive funding of FFr2 million (US\$335,000), and free assistance for a year from a senior consultant, who will provide business expertise and contacts. Winners will also be given training in the creation of enterprises at the University of Paris-Dauphine, including courses on financial management, the financing of innovation and market research.

Peking University's 100th birthday draws crowds

[BEIJING] About 100,000 alumni of Peking University were expected to turn up this week for the university's centennial celebrations on 4 May. University officials said that more than 10,000 were expected from overseas, and some jumbo jets were reportedly chartered from US cities to fly them in.

There has been frenzied activity on the campus recently to repave the roads and repaint the buildings for the celebrations, which will provide a vivid demonstration of the power of the network that links Chinese academics around the globe.

Earthquake scientists win Crafoord Prize

[WASHINGTON] Two earthquake specialists working in the United States have won this year's Crafoord Prize for "their fundamental contributions to our knowledge of the structures and processes in the interior of the Earth". Geophysicist Don L. Anderson, of the California Institute of Technology, and geologist Adam M. Dziewonski, of Harvard University, are to share the \$500,000 prize, which is awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for disciplines not covered by the Nobel prizes.

Anderson has shown how changes in the composition of the Earth's mantle can cause tensions in the planet's crust that lead to earthquakes, and Dziewonski's work on seismic waves has led to the development of computer tomography to measure and analyse global seismic data.

Congress funds research to speed up Internet

[WASHINGTON] Funding of \$57 million for university research into faster Internet links will become available at the National Science Foundation (NSF) as part of a \$6 billion supplemental funding bill signed into law by President Bill Clinton last Friday (1 May).

A provision in the bill releases \$57 million, which the NSF has acquired from licensing payments received whenever someone registers a domain name on the Internet. Early last month, a US District Court judge called into question the legality of these payments, and ruled that the money could

not be spent until Congress said that the funds had been collected appropriately. The bill does that, according to NSF officials.

Four share Australian award for genetics

[SYDNEY] The 1998 government-funded Australia Prize for molecular genetics, worth A\$300,000 (US\$195,000), has been shared by four scientists. Suzanne Cory was recognized for research, done mainly with her husband, Jerry Adams, at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne, that includes the discovery of the genetic mutation leading to Burkitt's lymphoma.

The second Australian winner was Grant Sutherland, working at the Adelaide Children's Hospital, who first mapped fragile sites on the X chromosome. Elizabeth Blackburn of the University of California, San Francisco, an Australian by birth, was rewarded for her work on the discovery of telomerase, and Sir Alec Jeffreys, from the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom, was honoured for the discovery in 1984 of DNA fingerprinting.

Rüttgers honoured for promotion of biotech

[MUNICH] Jürgen Rüttgers, the German science minister, was last week named as Best European Life Science Entrepreneur of the Year by the European Life Sciences Partnering Foundation, a body set up in 1992 by the venture capital company Atlas Venture and the business consultancy Ernst and Young.

Rüttgers was awarded the annual prize for his "exceptional contribution to the development of young European biotechnology companies". To promote biotechnology start-ups, Rüttgers set up the so-called BioRegio competition two years ago, and loosened the restrictive German legislation on genetic engineering.

World Bank signs deal to protect Brazil's forests

[LONDON] The World Bank and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) last week announced a joint agreement with the government of Brazil to protect 62 million acres of the Amazonian rainforest against development and slash-and-burn agriculture.

The estimated cost of between US\$100 million and US\$350 million will come from a combination of soft loans and cash from the Global Environment Fund, set up after the 1992 Earth Summit. The agreement represents the first result of a partnership between WWF and the bank announced last year. It is hoped that 125 million acres of forest will be protected worldwide by 2005.