

Oil industry lobby plans rival to UN climate science panel

[WASHINGTON] Members of the anti-global-warming lobby in the United States propose an industry-funded rival to the United Nations panel of climate scientists. The rival panel would seek to convince the public that the Kyoto agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is based on bad science.

The proposal comes from an unofficial group of public relations officials from oil companies Exxon and Chevron and the American Petroleum Institute. They suggest that \$5 million should be spent recruiting 20 scientists to set up a Global Climate Science Data Center as "a sound scientific alternative" to the UN-backed Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change.

Of that sum, \$600,000 would be spent on a public affairs offensive in the run-up to this November's meeting of the parties to Kyoto in Buenos Aires. Five scientific 'new faces' would be media-trained to attack the theory of man-made climate change.

The initiative, details of which were leaked by an environmentalist group, coincides with a decision by the British/Dutch oil company Shell to leave the Global Climate Coalition, the main US lobby group that opposes the climate treaty. Shell's decision follows that of BP, announced two years ago (see *Nature* 383, 470; 1996).

Chemical industry boost for German research

[MUNICH] Germany's chemical industry last year increased the number of scientists it employed in research and development for the first time since 1991, with the total rising by 1.4 per cent. The number of young scientists in the sector also rose in 1997, with an additional 1,900 employed — 9.5 per cent more than in 1996, according to the Association of the Chemical Industry (VCI).

The industry's spending on research carried out at home increased by DM400 million (US\$220 million) to a total of DM11.7 billion, or 6.2 per cent of turnover (a further DM5 billion was spent on basic research abroad). The trend of boosting research in Germany is the result mainly of reduced bureaucracy in laws on emissions and gene technology, says the VCI.

Science likely to lose its autonomy in Russia

[MOSCOW] Russia's Ministry of Science and Technology is likely to lose its autonomous status, according to unofficial reports from Moscow. The ministry is expected to be linked either with the Ministry of Education or made a department in the Ministry of

Economy. Both ideas are understood to be part of President Boris Yeltsin's drive to reduce the state's civil-service apparatus.

There are two candidates to head Russia's science programme. One is Mikhail Kirpichnikov, head of the department of science and education in the present cabinet and recently elected to the Russian Academy of Sciences. The other is Ivan Bortnik, director of the foundation for promoting small enterprises in science and technology, and a former deputy science minister.

France diverts funds to start-up innovators

[PARIS] Innovation in France is set to receive a substantial boost with a decision to invest a proportion of the funds from a popular endowment scheme in the country's stock market for start-up companies. Finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn has announced that five per cent of the funds of Assurance Vie will be invested in the Nouveau Marché — the French equivalent of NASDAQ in the United States.

The announcement comes in the run-up to a government-organized national colloquium on innovation, to be held on 12 May, which will be attended by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. The government is expected to announce a move that has been demanded by many scientists — the end of laws forbidding publicly funded researchers from holding shares or sitting on the boards of companies with which they have research links (see *Nature* 392, 214; 1998). This restriction is widely viewed as an obstacle to entrepreneurial culture in France.

Cambridge wins money for research centres

[LONDON] The University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom has secured £32 million (US\$53 million) from the chemical and food company Unilever and British Petroleum (BP) to fund two professorships and two new research centres.

Unilever will contribute £13 million over five years towards a centre for research into molecular sciences which, among other functions, will provide worldwide access to a databank of discoveries. BP is to give £1.3 million a year for 15 years to set up the BP Institute, to investigate the flow of oil, gas and water in the Earth.

The sponsorships surpass last year's £12 million donation by Microsoft chief Bill Gates for an advanced computer laboratory.

Antibiotics resistance 'is major threat to health'

[LONDON] Resistance to antibiotics has become a "major threat to public health" but little funding is available for research into

antimicrobial resistance, according to a report from the science and technology committee of the United Kingdom's House of Lords.

The report says the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) spent only £300,000 on antibiotic resistance during 1995–96, whereas in the same period £60 million was spent on research into immunology, infections and inflammatory disease.

The MRC told the Lords committee that there was a lack of high-quality research proposals. But Tessa Jowell, minister for public health, said that this was not necessarily the case. "The way in which research budgets are presently constructed does not necessarily mean that public health issues are given a proper opportunity to bid for resources," she said.

Japan set to support asteroid spotter

[TOKYO] The Japanese government's announcement last week that it would support the construction of an optical telescope and radar for detecting threatening space debris and near-Earth objects (NEOs) has been welcomed by space scientists as a contribution to international 'spaceguard' activities. The government had been lobbied to build such a telescope by the Japan Spaceguard Association.

The telescope, with an aperture of 1 metre, will detect asteroids that could collide with the Earth, as well as space debris such as spent boosters. The radar will be able to detect smaller debris in low Earth orbit at 400–1000 km, the same altitude as the planned international space station. The total project, expected to cost ¥2 billion (US\$15 million) over five years, will be funded by the Science and Technology Agency (STA).

Control engineer takes control in Australia

[CANBERRA] An engineer has for the first time become president of the Australian Academy of Science. Brian Anderson today (30 April) succeeds Sir Gustav Nossal for a four-year term. Anderson is the founding director of the Research School of Information Sciences and Engineering at the Australian National University in Canberra.

The 57-year-old Anderson is one of the most productive research engineers in Australia, with seven books and about 500 papers to his name, and specialises in electrical networks, communication and control systems and signal processing. He admits to concern about the limited support for research in Australia. "Until you can repair that underfunding, it is a bit illusory to talk about research policy," he says.