Troubled US fusion project receives cash injection

Washington

The US Department of Energy has agreed to provide more funds for the building of the National Ignition Facility (NIF) at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. It will contribute an extra \$200 million–\$250 million over the next two years, and will extend the construction schedule by four years, to 2008.

Confirming the worst predictions of the project's critics (see *Nature* 403, 469; 2000), Thomas Gioconda, assistant secretary of energy for defence programmes, said last week that the cost of the troubled project is now expected to exceed the original estimate of \$1.2 billion by between \$750 million and \$1 billion.

The NIF is the world's largest laser project, and aims to cause fusion by firing 192 huge lasers at a tiny deuterium target. The project is central to the US government's stockpile stewardship programme, which will maintain nuclear weapons — and the army of scientists and engineers that work with them — in the absence of nuclear testing.

Just how much the NIF is over budget will be confirmed in the next few weeks, when the General Accounting Office publishes a report on the project. But the scale of the cost overrun has shocked staff and members of Congress, where the Department of Energy's plan to complete the NIF must win approval.

Gioconda said that the money to complete the programme will come from the rest of the nuclear weapons research budget, and "predominantly" from the Livermore laboratory's \$1 billion annual budget. Previously, Bill Richardson, the energy secretary, had said that it would all come from Livermore's other programmes.

Under the new decision, announced on 3 May, a first phase of the NIF, with 96 working lasers, will be completed in 2004, with the rest becoming operational by 2008. The facility would aim to reach ignition — the point at which it produces a self-sustaining fusion reaction — in 2011.

Richardson's choice falls short of an alternative favoured by the Livermore laboratory, which would inject an extra \$390 million over the next two years to bring the project back on schedule. The laboratory says that it will now support Richardson's plan.

Despite the extraordinary scale of the cost overruns at the NIF, the indications are that Washington will continue to support the project, say administration and congressional staff.

Colin Macilwain

Medical tests cost Lawrence Berkeley \$2.2 million

San Francisco

In the first class-action suit claiming discrimination and invasion of privacy related to genetic and other medical testing, the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California has reached a provisional \$2.2 million settlement with a group of employees. But the laboratory continues to deny any wrong-doing.

Seven former and current employees filed the suit in 1995, arguing that, by testing its workers for pregnancy, sickle-cell trait and syphilis in occupational medical examinations without their knowledge, the US Department of Energy (DoE) laboratory was guilty of sexual and racial discrimination and invasion of privacy. The employees said the tests were especially harmful because they dealt with intimate matters, including genetic information.

In June 1996, the US District Court for the Northern District of California granted a petition by the laboratory to have the case dismissed. But that decision was reversed in 1998 by the US Court of Appeals (see *Nature* 393, 611; 1998).

Judge Stephen Reinhardt, who wrote the opinion, noted that "the conditions tested for were aspects of one's health in which one enjoys the highest expectations of privacy". He pointed out, for example, that a test for sickle-cell trait — one copy of the recessive gene for sickle-cell anaemia — could reveal information about family history and reproductive decision-making.

By providing genetic data, the test could disclose paternity, as well as the potential health of future generations. The laboratory said the tests were part of routine and comprehensive medical screening to which the employees had consented, and that they were consistent with good medical practice.

Lawrence Berkeley laboratory has agreed to settle the case, while still denying any damage to its employees. After about 18 months of mediation, the laboratory said it would pay the seven named plaintiffs \$25,000 each.

The deal set aside another \$100,000 for ten other early claimants and \$440,000 to pay the plaintiffs' legal costs. Awards of up to \$2,000 each would then go to other employees who came forward and said that they were also tested, depending on the tests performed.

Notices went out last week detailing the agreement to former and current employees. The court said that potential class members included all full- or part-time workers at the laboratory from January 1981 to April 1993.

The group also includes women employees between March 1972 and December 1994, who were probably tested for pregnancy, and African Americans who worked there from March 1972 to June 1995, who were likely to have been checked for sickle-cell trait.

No one involved in the case will comment on whether such testing was carried out at other DoE laboratories. The litigants have agreed not to discuss the case publicly until the court decides in July whether to approve the settlement.

Sally Lehrman

Australia improves its AIMS

Sydney

The Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), based at Cape Ferguson in northern Queensland, is to be upgraded, following a glowing review of the institute's work by Robin Batterham, Australia's chief scientist.

AIMS had been under threat of effective takeover by the country's largest national research agency, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). The CSIRO had proposed that the funds be put towards a new "Marine Research Centre of Excellence" in Townsville, 50 km away, with AIMS being closed and its research absorbed into the centre.

But Batterham said that AIMS should stay put, and be allowed to spend funds on laboratory expansion and a new research vessel. Nick Minchin, the minister responsible for both agencies, has agreed. Last week

Sea view: designed by AIMS, the WetPC lets divers do computerized surveys underwater.

he released A\$17 million (US\$10 million) in funding and commissioned Batterham to undertake a broader review of tropical marine research in Australia.

Peter Pockley