

## Recombinant DNA committee backs its proposed reform

**Washington.** The National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) on Monday gave its qualified approval to a plan for its own overhaul proposed by NIH director Harold Varmus last month. By a 12 votes to zero, with two abstentions, the committee, which currently ensures that novel gene therapy protocols are safe and ethical, endorsed Varmus's plan, which was published in the 22 November *Federal Register*.

The plan removes the RAC's role approving protocols and reduces the size of the committee from 25 to 15 members, while maintaining its job of publicly debating novel proposals. But RAC members, in a four-hour discussion, raised concerns about the weight and significance of their recommendations under the new scheme. They also expressed fears of a lack influence of proposed gene therapy policy conferences.

Varmus proposed the plan after public outcry over a proposal in July to disband the RAC altogether. He will consider the modifications suggested on Monday by the RAC in finalizing his proposal. While RAC members in general endorsed the plan, there was lengthy discussion about, and some objection to, its specifics. Some members complained that, because the FDA evaluates proposals privately, the RAC will have no way of knowing whether its recommendations on novel proposals are actually adopted. □

## US global warming paper roasted

**Geneva.** Environmental groups reacted angrily this week to the US government's latest position paper on combating global warming, which appears to propose delaying the start of legally binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

In its position paper issued at the start of a two-week review meeting in Geneva of signatories to the climate convention of 1992, the United States says that short-term targets — relating to the period before 2010 — are unrealistic, and proposes that signatories be allowed to “borrow against their targets for the next period, in order to emit more in a current period”. But Daniel Lashof, of the Natural Resources Defense Council, warns that this will increase pressure on developing countries to increase emissions before industrialized countries make any genuine reductions. □

## European patents cheaper

**Munich.** The European Patent Office (EPO) agreed last week to reduce its registration fees by 20 per cent. But as these fees are only 18 per cent of the total cost of a patent, the overall cost to an applicant — which averages DM60,000 (US\$38,960) for a patent registered in eight European countries — will fall by only 3 per cent.

The EPO is also keen to reduce translation fees, which account for more than a third of the costs of a patent, but cannot do so without changing its rules. At the moment a patent must be translated in full in all countries where it is registered, even though only the original version has legal status. Ingo Kober, president of the EPO, is proposing that the translation requirement be restricted to an abstract of the patent (unless it is being challenged). His proposal will be discussed by EPO's administrative council next year. □

## Weapons plutonium disposal

**Washington.** The United States is planning a two-track approach to dispose of its stock of 50 tonnes of excess plutonium from nuclear weapons. Some will be burnt as mixed-oxide fuel in commercial reactors, and the rest will be vitrified for underground storage. The plan, announced last week by Hazel O'Leary, the energy secretary, marks a sharp departure from established US practice of keeping

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military and civilian nuclear materials separate.

Administration officials hope that burning the plutonium in US reactors will encourage Russia to begin disposing of its own excess weapons plutonium. This position was supported recently by a US-Russian commission of leading nuclear scientists. Construction of a large plant at Savannah River, South Carolina, to convert plutonium into mixed-oxide fuel will create 10,000 jobs and help to win political support for the plan. □

## Call for health research cash

**Washington.** The Federation of American Scientists for Experimental Biology (FASEB) has called for an increase in funding for research at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) of 6.5 per cent in the 1998 fiscal year, which begins next October — the same increase as it successfully demanded for 1997. John Suttie, president of FASEB and professor of biochemistry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said that the increase, which would be worth some \$800 million to researchers, should come on top of money for a new clinical centre at NIH's campus in Bethesda, Maryland. □

## Canadian vessel will resurface

**Ottawa.** Canadian oceanographers hope to have a replacement for the ROPOS submersible, lost in a storm in October, in the water by early next summer. This follows the approval by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans of the proposal to use insurance funds to replace the vehicle. The scientists had feared the insurance funds might be used for another purpose (see *Nature* 384, 204; 1996).

Negotiations have begun with the submersible-builder. According to Kim Juniper, secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Scientific Submersible Facility, "there is a silver lining" to the rebuilding plan because it will allow improvements to the vehicle to be made based on operational experience. □

## ITER site in southern Italy?

**Rome.** Italy's research minister, Luigi Berlinguer, last week set up a committee to investigate possible sites in southern Italy for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor. The six-member panel is expected to deliver its report before next summer.

Berlinguer wants Europe to be able to offer at least one site for the reactor when bidding to host it opens at the end of next year. Last July, Germany and France withdrew from offering possible sites. Berlinguer wants the subsidies that the European Union offers to underdeveloped regions to support a site in southern Italy. □

## Lottery funds medical research

**London.** Britain's medical research charities are to benefit for the first time from the National Lottery. They had previously been excluded unless their work related to other approved goals, such as the relief of poverty. Of £180 million being distributed by the National Lottery Charities Board's health, disability and care programme, £6.7 million will go to medical research, of which £4.82 million is for members of the Association of Medical Research Charities. Diana Garnham, its general secretary, hoped the board would introduce an annual programme for medical research. □

## French science prize awarded

**Paris.** Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, professor of atomic and molecular physics at the Collège de France in Paris, last week received the Médaille d'Or, France's most prestigious science prize. The prize is awarded annually by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Cohen-Tannoudji's best-known recent work is perhaps that on the use of lasers to 'freeze' atoms. This research could improve the precision of atomic clocks and allow the production of coherent atomic waves similar to conventional lasers. □

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