

## Smithsonian lobby forces White House to abandon reform plans

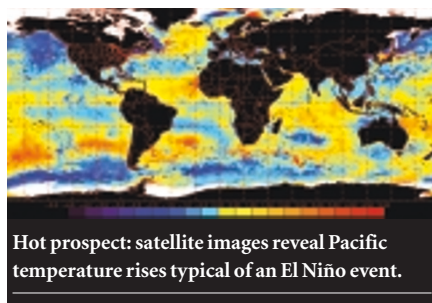
**Washington** Scientists at the Smithsonian Institution are quietly celebrating the defeat of a proposal to transfer the management of its best-known research facilities to the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Under a plan hatched by the White House's Office of Management and Budget, the presidential budget request for 2003 was expected to shift \$35 million to the NSF, making the agency responsible for the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, and the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater, Maryland (see *Nature* 414, 680; 2001).

Sources at the Smithsonian say that six members of its board of regents went to the White House to argue against the decision, saying that the transfer would cost more money and that research funding is already very competitive. The White House is now expected to abandon the proposal, requesting instead a study of how to support research in the Smithsonian.

## Pacific warming raises fears of another El Niño

**Washington** Nations that fringe the Pacific Ocean could be struck by another El Niño event within months, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The agency's satellites have detected a warming of the



Hot prospect: satellite images reveal Pacific temperature rises typical of an El Niño event.

tropical Pacific that is characteristic of the phenomenon, which typically disrupts the climate on both sides of the ocean.

The last El Niño event, which was particularly powerful, subsided in 1998. "At this point it is too early to predict if this El Niño might develop along the same lines as the 1997–98 episode or be weaker," says Vernon Kousky of the NOAA Climate Prediction Center in Washington.

## French researchers hit by agency age change

**Paris** France's main research agency, the CNRS, has upset the career plans of hundreds of young researchers by reducing the age limit for those applying for a permanent position. The move comes only a month before the deadline for applications.

The change reduces the age limit for the lowest level of entry on the CNRS research career ladder from "under 32" to "under 31", and brings it in line with other public research agencies. Last year, over 400 candidates between these ages applied for positions at this grade. Around 80 were successful.

CNRS director-general Geneviève Berger admits that the situation is "painful" and is

creating up to 80 two-year postdoctoral positions in 2002 for the affected candidates. She is also encouraging them to apply for higher-grade posts, which have no age limit.

## Dispute over stem-cell rights is resolved

**Washington** A squabble over who can work on the world's first human embryonic stem (ES) cell lines has been resolved. James Thomson of the University of Wisconsin at Madison unveiled the first human ES cells in 1998. But since last August, the company that backed his work, Geron of Menlo Park in California, has been in dispute with the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF). The foundation challenged Geron's claim to exclusive rights to develop therapies based on the differentiation of the cells into a variety of cell types (see *Nature* 412, 753; 2001).

The new agreement gives Geron exclusive rights to develop therapies and diagnostics based on nerve cells, cardiac muscle cells and pancreatic islet cells, which secrete insulin, and non-exclusive rights to some other cell types. WARF says it will allow academic researchers and government scientists to work on the cells "without royalties or fees".

## US shifts its stance on nuclear weapons

**Washington** The US administration has unveiled a strategic plan to maintain its stockpile of nuclear weapons while reducing the number of warheads deployed.

The number of US warheads in commission will be cut from 6,000 to roughly 2,000 over the next decade. But none of the decommissioned warheads will be destroyed, and officials say that an unspecified number will be put into storage. The plan also calls on the US Department of Energy to reduce the time needed to prepare for the resumption of underground bomb testing — although a 1992 US moratorium on testing will remain in place for now.

The plan has been attacked by arms-control experts and the Russian government.

## Yucca Mountain chosen as radioactive waste dump

**Washington** Nevada's Yucca Mountain should be the site of a long-term repository for nuclear waste, US energy secretary Spencer Abraham announced last week.

The proposed underground repository will house up to 77,000 tonnes of nuclear waste. If, as expected, President George W. Bush gives his approval, the state of Nevada will have 60 days to notify Congress of its disapproval. Congress can overturn Nevada's objection by a simple majority vote, but any subsequent decision to go ahead is likely to be challenged in court (see *Nature* 415, 6; 2002).

## Brown dwarf shines to put astronomers in orbit

**Washington** The brown dwarf shown here orbiting the star 15 Sge is the closest object yet photographed orbiting a Sun-like star outside the Solar System. Michael Liu of the University of Hawaii and his colleagues took the image using adaptive optics, which correct for atmospheric distortion, on the 8.1-metre Gemini North telescope in Hawaii. They unveiled it last week at the American Astronomical Society's meeting in Washington.

The lower image has been processed to suppress the light from the star, so the brown dwarf can be clearly seen near the bottom. The object orbits 15 Sge at 14 times the distance of the Earth from the Sun — which in our Solar System would be between Saturn and Uranus. Brown dwarfs are intermediate between planets and stars; they are not massive enough for nuclear fusion to occur in their cores.

