

Genome projects net pufferfish and zebrafish sequences

London Gene hunters and developmental biologists are preparing for a feast in the form of two fresh fish genomes, one complete and one in a useful draft form.

The genome of the pufferfish (*Fugu rubripes*) was published online last week by an international consortium (S. Aparicio *et al. Science* 10.1126/science.1072104). At 365 million base pairs, it lacks much of the 'junk' DNA found within the human genome, fitting roughly the same number of genes into a genome about one-tenth of the size. This should make it easier to identify genes.

A preliminary assembly of the zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) genome was also released last week by another consortium led from the Sanger Institute at Hinxton, near Cambridge, UK. The data will help researchers to make sense of the thousands of zebrafish mutants that are studied around the world. Zebrafish embryos are transparent and develop quickly, making the zebrafish a favourite model organism in vertebrate developmental biology. Although the sequence is an early draft, the team says it is releasing the data "because there is an enormous amount of useful sequence and this outweighs the problems in the assembly".

► www.ensembl.org/Danio_rerio



Inflated importance: the pufferfish has the same number of genes as a human, but less junk DNA.

Senate committee plans mixed budget news for NSF

Washington A US Senate committee has recommended increasing funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF) by 11.8% next year — but wants to slash the foundation's budget for big projects by almost a half.

The proposed budget released by the Committee on Appropriations late last week calls for a \$645 million increase in funding, almost double the rise requested by President George Bush (see *Nature* 415, 565; 2002). But it also recommended cutting 43% from the

NSF's large-projects fund by delaying a major environmental monitoring project, known as the National Ecological Observatory Network, and withholding \$20 million from EarthScope, a series of large projects in the Earth sciences.

In part, the cut reflects concerns in Congress about the NSF's management of large projects. The EarthScope money, for example, will be restored when the NSF dedicates a staff member to manage the construction budget for such projects.

The House of Representatives is currently drafting its own version of the spending bill, which must be reconciled with the Senate bill and signed by President Bush later this year.

Fears of data misuse spur publishing debate

Washington The US National Academy of Sciences (NAS) plans to hold a meeting of publishers, scientists and national-security experts to examine how scientific journals should handle sensitive data that could potentially be used by terrorists.

The meeting, which is expected to take place in the autumn, is being called in response to a letter sent by Ron Atlas, president of the American Society for Microbiology, to the NAS president Bruce Alberts on 22 July. Atlas pointed out in the letter that the society has received many requests from researchers who wish to withhold data from papers that they submit to its journals (see *Nature* 415, 821; 2002). He wrote: "The purpose... would be to initiate discussion about the possible development and eventual adoption of common publication policies."

"There's been a lot of talk about these issues, but we don't know how real the problem actually is," says NAS spokesman Bill Kearney. "We hope this meeting will help us to find out."

Moon samples safe as FBI ends students' rock folly

Washington Three NASA summer interns have tried to supplement their stipends by stealing Moon rocks and selling them over the Internet. The gang, plus one accomplice, has been charged with taking a safe containing 130 grams of Moon samples from NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. They drove the safe to Tampa, Florida, and attempted to auction off the contents on a Belgian website.

NASA officials were unaware that their rocks had gone missing until they received a tip from a Belgian mineralogist. In an undercover operation, FBI officials negotiated a deal with the interns, then arrested them when they showed up to sell the specimens.

Election seeds end to transgenic crop ban

Wellington A political crisis over genetically modified (GM) crops in New Zealand seems to have been averted. In the run-up to the general election on 27 July, the country's current moratorium on the release of GM organisms became a prominent campaign issue.

The centre-left Labour government of Prime Minister Helen Clark had signalled that it would not extend the moratorium, which is set to expire in October 2003. But the Green Party, which many political pundits believed would end up holding the balance of power after the election, was determined that the moratorium should be retained.

The row became a hot issue with the release of a book called *Seeds of Distrust*, which alleged from leaked documents that Clark's government had concealed an incident in which maize seeds contaminated with GM material were planted over an area of 178 hectares.

In the event, however, last week's poll gave Clark's party enough seats to form a minority government without having to rely exclusively on Green support.

Britain unveils strategy for spending new science cash

London First British science was given a major injection of funds, now it has a new strategy. On 23 July, the government released *Investing in Innovation*, a document that details changes that will accompany the £1.25-billion (US\$1.95-billion) increase in funding announced earlier in the month (see *Nature* 418, 261; 2002).

In return for the extra money, government departments will have to prepare detailed budgets for science and innovation. All government-funded research will also be subjected to scrutiny by outside experts — the details and costs of which will be decided in the autumn.

Under the new strategy, David King, the government's chief scientific adviser, should get more authority to coordinate the science programmes of various government departments. In addition, every department with a significant science budget will be made to appoint its own chief scientific adviser. These advisers will have direct access to their respective Cabinet ministers, and will also help to review one another's research programmes.



Clear winner: Helen Clark does not need Green Party support.