Applied Biosystems blames staff layoff on lack of demand

San Francisco The lab-technology company Applied Biosystems says that falling demand for its gene-sequencing technologies is to blame for its decision to cut 500 jobs, mainly in the United States and Europe.

The cuts, which will be implemented this month, amount to 9% of the company's workforce. The redundancies follow the axeing of 132 jobs last June from the firm's affiliate company Celera Genomics, based in Rockville, Maryland, which has shifted its emphasis from selling genetic data to discovering new drug targets.

Applied Biosystems, based in Foster City, California, cites several reasons for the slump, including spending cuts in the pharmaceutical industry and the ongoing lack of a 2003 budget for the US National Institutes of Health.

India joins dissenters in row over transgenic food aid

New Delhi **Arguments over the use of genetically modified crops in food aid have spread from Africa to India.**

The issue hit the headlines last year, when Zambia refused to accept aid containing transgenic food. Now it has emerged that last May, India rejected a US shipment of maize and soya bound for the southern state of Orissa. The decision became public last week when Senator Kit Bond (Republican, Missouri) raised the issue during a visit to New Delhi.

Indian environmental groups have accused US companies of dumping surplus transgenic foods into aid packages, although India receives only a small amount of food aid every year. Indian researchers advising the government are against a blanket ban on genetically modified foods, but say that such foods should be labelled. India has licensed transgenic cotton, but has not sanctioned the commercial use of genetically modified foods.

Heavy fine for light-fingered archaeologist

San Diego An amateur archaeologist who removed skeletons and other artefacts from an American Indian site has been handed a civil fine of US$2.5 million.

Officials allege that Jack Harelson of Grants Pass, Oregon, gained inside knowledge about the site — Elephant Mountain Cave in northwest Nevada — while working as a volunteer at the Nevada State Museum in Carson City during the 1980s. Harelson served 18 months in jail and paid a $20,000 fine about five years ago for the crime, but the civil penal process was delayed by appeals until last month. The Department of Justice says it will now move to seize Harelson's property and dock his wages.

Harelson maintains that he kept the skeletons and artefacts for a decade as part of an amateur research project, and says that he will appeal against the fine.

High-altitude observatory meets mounting opposition

Washington **Plans for a facility designed to study star formation are facing some down-to-Earth problems. Native American tribes say that the Combined Array for Research in Millimeter-wave Astronomy, a radio telescope due to be built in the Inyo Mountains in southern California, will intrude on their ancestral lands. A local plant society has also voiced objections, claiming that the project will damage the region's pristine environment.**

Astronomers argue that the array, which will be formed by merging two existing Californian radio telescopes, should be sited in the Inyo region, as its arid conditions and high altitude give ideal viewing conditions. The $15-million facility, which would occupy about 300 hectares, is due to be completed by 2005. Leo Blitz, an astronomer at the University of California, Berkeley, says that the project's organizers will continue to work with local groups to resolve the problems.

Radio telescope plan gets inaugural chief

Amsterdam Ambitious plans to build the Square Kilometer Array, a radio telescope 100 times more powerful than any existing facility, are to be spearheaded by Richard Schilizzi, former director of the Joint Institute for Very Long Baseline Interferometry in Europe.

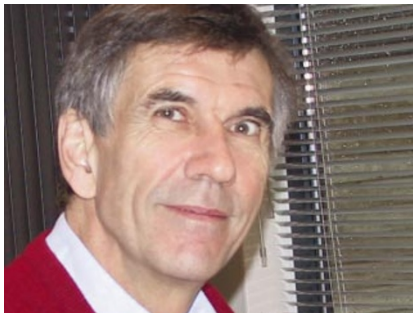
The increased power of the array will allow researchers to study very distant objects, making it possible to probe the era before stars and galaxies formed. Researchers will also be able to extend the search for intelligent life to millions more galaxies, and to reveal new pulsars, objects that emit pulses of radio waves.

Consortia in Australia, Canada, China, India, Europe and the United States are competing to host the array, which will cost about US$1 billion to build. A design will be chosen in 2007, with the aim of beginning the five-year construction plan in 2010.

Schilizzi, currently at Leiden University in the Netherlands, was appointed as the first director of the project on 1 January.

www.skatelescope.org

SKA



Richard Schilizzi will lead the Square Kilometre Array project in its initial planning stages.

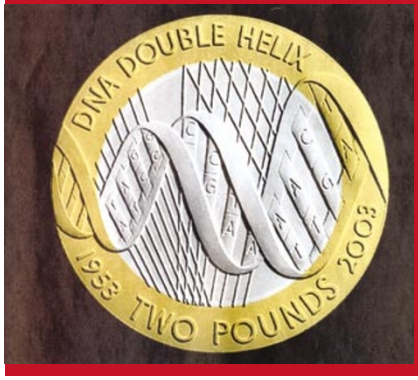
What do you get if you cross comedy with gene profiling?

Tokyo **Blood samples, microarrays and two comedians — these are the ingredients for a study of the links between laughter and health.**

Kazuo Murakami, a biochemist and professor emeritus of Tsukuba University in Japan, wants to determine whether laughter is good for you. On 12 January, comic duo B&B will perform in Tsukuba, and Murakami's team will examine what happens to the expression of genes linked to immunity and blood-sugar level in the audience. Both types of gene are thought to be affected by stress.

In one experiment, four Tsukuba University students will have blood taken before and after the performance. Researchers will use DNA microarrays to monitor the activity of 1,400 genes related to immunity. The blood sugar levels of 25 older audience members will also be tested. "People always talk about the health effects of negative stress. We want to study the effects of positive stress," says Murakami.

Double helix gets minty fresh image



London **Fifty years after it became scientific currency, the structure of DNA is to be commemorated on a British coin. The Royal Mint is marking the anniversary of James Watson and Francis Crick's discovery by inscribing the famous double-helix configuration on a new £2 coin.**

All £2 coins issued to banks by the Royal Mint for general circulation this year will feature the inscription. A separate commemorative coin made of silver and gold will also be produced, for sale to collectors and wealthy biologists.