

NASA on board as search for intelligent life takes off again

Washington The hunt for distant civilizations is back on NASA's agenda. The SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute, based in Mountain View, California, announced earlier this month that it had received a five-year, US\$5-million grant from NASA to conduct research into the planetary context for life.

The money represents SETI's first major funding from NASA since 1993. Funds were cut after critics in Congress caricatured SETI as a wacky hunt for aliens. The institute continued as a private non-profit organization, but the recent economic downturn has put it under increasing financial pressure.

"We're glad to have them on board," says Rose Grymes, who heads NASA's Astrobiology Institute at the Ames Research Centre at Moffett Field, California, which is funding the research. Grymes says that SETI researchers will conduct studies of Jupiter's moons, as well as preparing a list of stars that might be home to intelligent life.

Japanese push for patents 'sidelines basic research'

Tokyo Japanese researchers have been given their strongest instructions yet to push the industrial applications of their work.

Guidelines on the creation and protection of intellectual property, released on 8 July by a committee of politicians and external experts, call on funding agencies and ministries to give patents and intellectual property equal importance with publications when evaluating researchers.

"The new system will influence not only funding decisions for individuals but also university and research-institute evaluations, and eventually hiring decisions," says Koichi Sumikura, an intellectual-property expert at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.

The guidelines have heightened fears that the government is more concerned with intellectual property than basic research. Only two of the committee's 28 members were scientists. Creation of intellectual property has also been a key ingredient of plans that were approved last week to reorganize the national universities (see *Nature* 419, 875–876; 2002).

Nerve-gas experiments will not go to court

London No prosecutions will be made over controversial human research that took place between 1939 and 1989 at Porton Down, a UK Ministry of Defence (MOD)



In safe hands? Volunteers allege that they were unfairly experimented on at Porton Down.

weapons testing facility in Wiltshire.

The decision not to bring charges, announced by the Crown Prosecution Service on 8 July, follows a four-year inquiry carried out by Wiltshire police and the MOD into allegations of illegal experiments carried out at the facility.

Operation Antler involved interviews with 250 ex-service personnel, many of whom claim they were tricked into participating in nerve-gas experiments — some under the pretence of research into the common cold — and had suffered long-term illness as a result.

Eight cases were passed to the prosecution service by investigators, but the service said that more than 700 people were contacted in the investigation, and although many had suffered illness, others subjected to the same experiments showed no long-term effects.

A separate coroner's inquest into the death of Ronald George Maddison, who died during testing at Porton Down in 1953, has been set for September.

Grants plan paves way for Europe-wide funding body

Munich The European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) is to become a grant-giving agency.

The change provides a stimulus to those who want to create a Europe-wide science funding body. "This could act as a prototype for other, more ambitious programmes, such as the European Research Council," says Julio Celis, a cell biologist at the University of Aarhus in Denmark and president of the European Molecular Biology Conference, the intergovernmental body that funds EMBO.

Members of the conference earlier this month agreed in principle to launch the EMBO Research Award Programme. The 24 member states will now negotiate how much each will contribute towards the €30 million (US\$34 million) that will be awarded each year. EMBO hopes to be able to issue its first call for proposals next year.

The move could also aid plans to create a European Research Area covered by a unified science policy.

Britain takes fresh look at spallation source

London The dwindling hopes of European researchers who want to host a next-generation neutron source received a boost last week, when UK science minister David Sainsbury commissioned a review of Britain's neutron-science projects.

The review will include an assessment of the proposed £1-billion (US\$1.6-billion) European Spallation Source, which would be the most powerful in the world. Plans for the source, which would probe the structures of materials and molecules, have been given a lukewarm reception by funding bodies in France and Germany (see *Nature* 418, 262; 2002). The British review, which will be completed by 2005, has revived hopes that the source could yet get built.

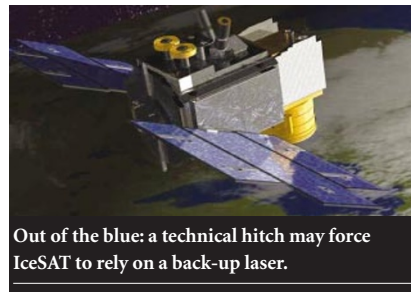
"It's tremendous news," says Robert Cywinski, a physicist at the University of Leeds and an adviser on the project. "We have the largest and most experienced community of neutron scatterers in Europe, and we need to provide facilities for their research."

Laser breakdown takes satellite's eye off the ice

Washington Data from a NASA satellite designed to monitor the mass of polar ice sheets stopped flowing this month when its laser altimeter broke down. The laser on the Ice, Cloud, and Land Elevation Satellite (ICESat), launched in January, scans ice sheets to reveal how they change over time.

Project manager Jim Watzin, based at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, says that ICESat has two back-up lasers, but he doesn't plan to use them straight away. "We must be sure that the back-ups will not break down in the same way," he says. A NASA panel is investigating and hopes to have a rescue plan by the end of the month.

Another troubled satellite is faring better. Scientists working on the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory have found a way to avoid the periodic data blackouts caused by a malfunctioning antenna (see *Nature* 423, 910; 2003). Signals will be sent from another antenna that is normally used to transmit non-scientific data.



Out of the blue: a technical hitch may force ICESAT to rely on a back-up laser.