

Cuts to NASA's budget leave plans for Mars mission grounded

Washington Mars seems a little farther away now that the House of Representatives committee that determines NASA's budget has cut \$1.1 billion from the space agency's \$16.2-billion request for next year. The move is a blow to President George Bush's plan to send astronauts to the Moon and Mars (see *Nature* 427, 183; 2004).

On 22 July, the committee deleted \$438 million proposed for the Crew Exploration Vehicle, the first big hardware purchase intended for the programme. It also cut \$230 million from a nuclear-rocket development effort that figures prominently in the Moon-Mars plans and a scientific mission to Jupiter and its icy moons.

House majority leader Tom DeLay, a powerful Republican whose Texas district includes NASA's Johnson Space Center, branded the action "unacceptable" and vowed to oppose the cuts. The Senate is expected to weigh in on the issue in September, but the final decision is unlikely to be made until after the presidential election in November.



Water world: the marshes of Mesopotamia are being restored, creating a habitat for wild birds.

Cash floods in to save Iraq's Garden of Eden

Tokyo There is fresh hope for the damaged wetlands in Iraq that are thought to be the location of the biblical Garden of Eden.

The marshlands of Mesopotamia were reduced to less than a tenth of their original area of 20,000 square kilometres when the Tigris and Euphrates river systems were dammed and drained by Saddam Hussein's regime. But the Japanese government pledged on 23 July to invest US\$11 million to restore and protect the marshes, under a scheme run by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Local residents have re-flooded a fifth of the wetlands since the collapse of Saddam's regime, although a lack of sanitation services led to the spread of water-borne diseases.

Blue whale makes a splash on return to Alaska

San Francisco Blue whales have been sighted for the first time in 30 years in the waters off Alaska, where they had been hunted close to extinction.

Researchers aboard the research vessel *McArthur II* photographed the blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) some 200 kilometres southeast of Prince

William Sound. An ocean-floor recording system had picked up the sounds of blue whales communicating over the past few years, but the photographs, taken earlier this month, are the first to document their presence.

The cruise's chief scientist, Jay Barlow of the US Southwest Fisheries Science Center in



La Jolla, California, says the sighting was a bonus as his team had set out to study humpback whales. One of the photographed blue whales (seen here) appears to be the same individual that has been spotted in recent years off southern California, although further analysis of the photographs is needed to confirm this.

The UNEP project will equip about a dozen settlements with small-scale water treatment systems, and local people will be trained in wetland management. Reed beds, which act as natural water-filtration systems, will also be restored, providing habitats for birds and other wildlife.

Race is key to rapid approval of heart drug

New York A heart drug being tested in African Americans is on course to become the first medicine approved for use in a specific ethnic group.

A clinical trial of BiDil, developed by NitroMed of Lexington, Massachusetts, was stopped on 19 July because it seems to be so effective when used in addition to normal therapy. The drug, which relaxes blood vessels and eases the strain on the pumping heart, could be launched in 2005, if it is approved by the US Food and Drug Administration.

But the trial has stirred controversy. Some scientists say it would be better to search for the specific genetic variations involved in a response to a drug, rather than relying on race. Anne Taylor of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, who led the trial, says the team plans to scan the genes of those patients who responded to BiDil. In the meantime, she argues, race may serve as a reasonable surrogate when making prescriptions.

Bush backs biotech to build defence stockpile

Washington Biotech companies in the United States will receive billions of dollars of government support over the next decade under plans to tackle bioterrorism.

Project Bioshield, which was signed into law by President George Bush on 21 July,

sets aside \$5.6 billion for the government to purchase vaccines and antidotes to potential bioweapons from private firms. The legislation also contains provisions that will allow the health secretary, Tommy Thompson, to speed grants for research projects through "expedited peer-review procedures" if they are deemed essential to biodefence needs.

"Private industry plays a vital role in our biodefence efforts," Bush said at a signing ceremony at the White House. "By acting as a willing buyer for the best new medical technologies, the government ensures that our drug stockpile remains safe, effective and advanced."

Plankton provide route to monitoring climate

London Plankton could serve as an index for the effect of climate change on the world's aquatic systems, marine scientists have suggested.

The movement of ocean currents as a result of climate change is already known to have hit cod stocks. The warm-water phytoplankton on which they feed have moved 1,000 km northward in the eastern Atlantic over the past 40 years (G. Beaugrand *et al. Science* 296, 1692-1694; 2004). So tracking the distribution of plankton could help scientists to keep tabs on climate change, according to Chris Reid, director of the Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science in Plymouth, UK.

"Observing changes in plankton could provide an early warning for changes in marine and freshwater systems," agrees Martin Attrill, a marine ecologist at the University of Plymouth who organized and hosted the conference at which Reid made his proposal last week. Reid says that more plankton data will be needed to create the index, particularly from little-studied areas such as the Norwegian and Barents seas.