

## Grant probe leaves DNA lab without direction

The future of one of the top laboratories studying ancient DNA is in doubt after its director resigned under a cloud.

In just six years, the Henry Wellcome Ancient Biomolecules Centre at the University of Oxford, UK, has made many high-profile finds using genetic material from ancient samples.

But geneticist Alan Cooper, the centre's founding director, resigned on 22 April following a university investigation into his conduct. Oxford officials declined to discuss specifics, but issued a statement saying that: "Allegations relate solely to material included in grant applications and not to published research results or the conduct of ongoing research."

Sources say that the probe examined claims that, in a grant application to the Natural Environment Research Council, a figure was incorrectly reproduced and there were questions over certain signatures.

In an interview with *Nature*, Cooper acknowledged that there had been some problems, saying "there were a couple of errors in judgment". He is now setting up a similar lab at the University of Adelaide in South Australia.

## Rift over successor to Kyoto is as wide as ever

A United Nations seminar in Bonn, Germany, last week failed to end the transatlantic impasse over climate change, especially once the Kyoto Protocol has expired in 2012.

The treaty, which came into force in February, requires industrialized countries to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases. The European Union has called for a



Hazy prospects: the future of agreements on greenhouse-gas emissions is clouded in doubt.

## NASA told to think small in hunt for asteroids

A bill sponsored by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (Republican, California) would require NASA to extend the search for threatening asteroids and comets down to objects as small as 100 metres across. If enacted, the bill, which passed the House Science Committee last week, would authorize \$20 million a year for the next two years to get the search under way.

NASA is already on track to catalogue 90% of objects more than 1 kilometre in size by 2008. But smaller objects

### IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

could still cause regional or even global damage if they hit. "Any threat that would wreak havoc on our world should be studied and prevented if possible," says Rohrabacher. A NASA committee

concluded in 2003 that the search for smaller objects could be done for less than \$400 million. But the panel's chair, Grant Stokes of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Laboratory, whose LINEAR search

currently accounts for most near-Earth asteroid discoveries, says no funding agency has picked up the tab, in part because asteroid-hunting doesn't fulfil an obvious science mission. "In a sense, it's a public service," he says.

M. FISHER/NEWS.COM

follow-up commitment that would require emissions to be cut by 15–30% relative to 1990 levels by 2020.

This goal is hardly achievable without the cooperation of the United States, which withdrew from the protocol in 2001 and is the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases. But the United States made no sign last week of going back on its brusque rejection of mandatory targets for reducing emissions.

One positive sign was a move led by several less-industrialized countries, including China and Papua New Guinea, towards more actively tackling climate change, says Karla Schoeters, director of the Climate Action Network, a European umbrella agency working on climate and energy issues.

## Science adviser quits after conflict-of-interest furore

Australia's chief scientist, Robin Batterham, has resigned his government post to work full-time for the mining and energy giant Rio Tinto.

During his six-year tenure, Batterham worked part-time for the company while spending two days a week advising the government on policies including carbon dioxide emissions. Critics argued that this represented a conflict of interest.

Last year, a Senate inquiry found no evidence of improper conduct by Batterham, but recommended that the position of chief scientist should be full-time. The government has yet to decide on the terms of the next appointment. Batterham, who will have a say in the selection, says that industrial experience is crucial.

Environmental lobbyists had been angered by Batterham's dismissal of the Kyoto Protocol, which Australia refused to ratify.

## Pressure eases on AIDS groups to denounce vice

There's a new twist in the ongoing debate about whether the United States can force international AIDS-fighting groups to denounce prostitution.

Earlier this month, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a document stating that agencies applying for money from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria must take a public stand against prostitution and sex trafficking. But last week the agency changed its mind.

Randall Tobias, the Bush administration's global AIDS coordinator, has had the policy rescinded, saying he never approved it.

Public-health advocates have pointed out that prostitutes are at particularly high risk of HIV infection, and that opposing prostitution could alienate this group, hampering efforts to slow the virus's spread.

## US government urged to aid foreign scientists' entry

The US government must do more to make it easier for foreign scientists to enter the country, a group of scientific and academic societies declared last week.

In a statement, the coalition of 40 societies — including the National Academy of Sciences and the Association of American Universities — warned that "despite significant recent improvements to the US visa system, considerable barriers remain". Foreign scientists must still submit to lengthy security review, the group said. And the government is considering a new set of rules that could limit researchers' activities in the lab (see *Nature* 435, 4; 2005). The group is asking that those rules are not brought in.