

Physicists denounce aggressive nuclear policy

More than 700 physicists from around the world have signed a petition opposing a US policy that would permit the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear nations.

Spawned during a lunchtime talk at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), the petition is being submitted to US government leaders. Eight Nobel laureates have signed the petition, which was started by UCSD physicists Kim Griest and Jorge Hirsch.

The administration of President George W. Bush has said that, if provoked, it would consider using nuclear bombs on a country without such weapons.

"Physicists were responsible for these weapons," says Hirsch, a native of Argentina. "We need to speak out more."

The petitioners hope to win the support of the American Physical Society and the International Atomic Energy Agency at board meetings later this month.

► <http://physics.ucsd.edu/petition>

Fire engulfs research centre at Southampton University

Fire has destroyed a leading UK optoelectronics research centre.

Firemen took nearly 10 hours to bring a blaze that started on 30 October under control at the University of Southampton's Optoelectronics Research Centre. Initial reports suggested little would be salvaged from the building, which included a microfabrication facility. The fire also destroyed laboratories and offices of the School of Electronics and Computer Science.

University officials were surveying the damage as *Nature* went to press and said that further announcements would be made this week. No injuries had been reported and the cause of the fire is not thought to be suspicious.

Kansas raises hackles with rewrite of science guides

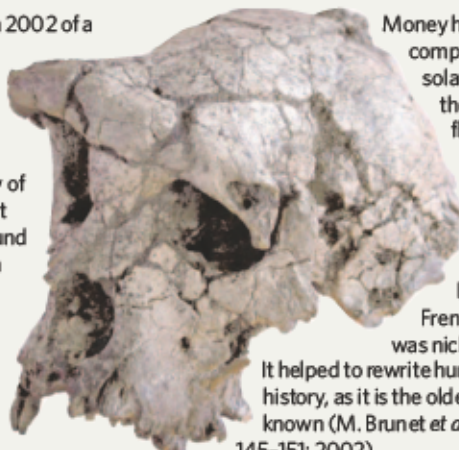
The US science establishment is washing its hands of education standards in Kansas that portray evolution as "controversial" and remove wording that defines science as "systematically seeking natural explanations for what we observe in the world around us".

The Kansas standards are based on copyrighted guidelines that were originally prepared by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), based in Washington DC, and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) in Arlington, Virginia.

Chad gives fossil hunters a head start

Inspired by the discovery in 2002 of a 7-million-year-old hominid skull within its borders, Chad last month opened its first palaeontology department.

Housed at the University of Ndjamena, the department will serve as a training ground for scientists from western and central Africa, says its head, Hassane Taïso Mackaye. The newly refurbished building will also be home to a collection of vertebrate skeletons from the Sahel.



Money has been spent on computers, as well as solar panels to keep the electricity flowing, as Ndjamena suffers from regular power cuts. The hominid skull discovered by Chadian and French researchers was nicknamed Tournai.

It helped to rewrite human evolutionary history, as it is the oldest hominid known (M. Brunet *et al. Nature* 418, 145–151; 2002).

Nearly every state uses some version of the guidelines in their science standards. But the Kansas Board of Education edited the text to conform to the anti-evolution sympathies of six of the ten board members.

After looking over the standards, the academy and the teachers' association last week refused to grant permission to use their source materials, saying the wording compromised the original documents.

The board will vote on the edited standards on 8 November. They may be approved, with the understanding that passages will be rewritten to avoid infringing the NAS and NSTA copyrights, says board secretary Penny Plamann.

NASA gets go ahead to buy Russian trips to space

NASA came closer to solving its transportation woes last week with the passage of legislation that will let US astronauts continue to ride on Russian spacecraft.

The House of Representatives passed amendments to the Iran Nonproliferation

Act of 2000, which had prevented the United States purchasing seats on the Soyuz vehicle that currently serves as the lifeboat on the International Space Station (see *Nature* 436, 11; 2005). Russia had been providing seats as part of the space-station partnership; NASA was supposed to take over with its own rescue service when that agreement expired, but a planned US vehicle was cancelled in 2001.

The amendments, which are expected to pass the Senate and be signed into law by President Bush, allow NASA to buy the Russian services it needs to keep operating the space station until 2012. By that time, the United States is expected to have a new Crew Exploration Vehicle as a replacement for the space shuttle. NASA may also be booking commercial flights to orbit by 2012; the agency plans in December to solicit industry ideas for providing transportation to the station.

Stock ownership of FDA ex chief comes to light

A possible reason for the sudden departure of the US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) chief is starting to emerge.

Lester Crawford, who resigned abruptly in September without explanation (see *Nature* 437, 606; 2005), held stock in several companies regulated by the FDA while he was its top official, the government disclosed last week. He and his wife had stock in companies including Embrex, an agricultural biotechnology firm; Kimberly-Clark and Teleflex, which make medical products and devices; and Pepsico and Sysco, which make and distribute foods regulated by the FDA.

Crawford has not publicly described the full reasons for his departure, but some US newspapers have reported that the stock ownership may have played a role.



Ticket to ride: US astronauts will reach the space station by buying seats on Russian spacecraft.