

## California hands out grants for stem-cell research

The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) has approved its first research grants, awarding US\$45 million in 72 grants to 20 research institutions in the state. The total is more than the National Institutes of Health is expected to spend on human embryonic stem-cell work this year.

The grants range from around \$250,000 to \$800,000 to support a range of projects, including efforts to study the flexibility of embryonic stem cells and how they can be used to treat disease. CIRM president Zach Hall says the grants are designed to attract new investigators: 30 went to scientists who have never worked with stem cells, and 27 have gone to researchers who have run their labs for six years or less.

The institute is embroiled in litigation over its right to exist. But stopgap funding from private investors and the state has permitted the first round of grants. The next round, for more established investigators, is expected to be awarded in March.

## Virgin Galactic launches collaboration with NASA

Burt Rutan, who built the first private spaceship, has often criticized NASA for its bureaucracy and slowness. But now a successor to the craft that Rutan built could enter commercial service in 2009 — with a little help from NASA.

The private spaceflight company Virgin Galactic, which licensed technology developed for Rutan's SpaceShipOne, is talking to NASA about the possibility of collaborating on technology projects.

Officials at NASA's Ames Research Center at Moffett Field, California, said on 21 February that they would talk to Virgin engineers about working together to develop spacesuits, heatshields for spaceships, hybrid rocket motors and hypersonic craft.

## Britain cuts funding for research councils

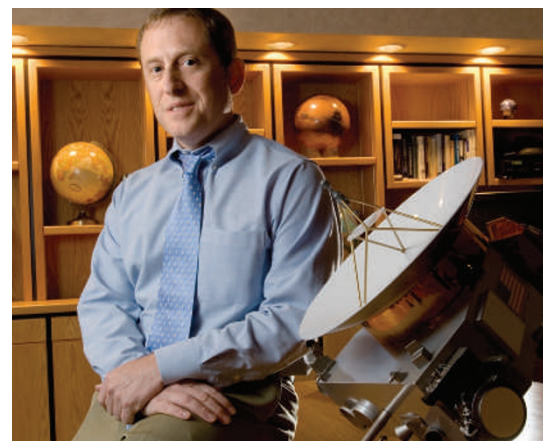
It is only a small cut, but the fact it has happened at all is worrying UK science managers. After years of boosting research spending, the British government is to cut almost £100 million (US\$196 million) from the science budget over the next two years.

The money will come from a pot used to smooth the transition from one financial year to the next and amounts to about 1.5% of the £6.6 billion allocated to science during that period. But some disciplines will still suffer: the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council says it will meet later this month to consider how to deal with the £29 million it will lose. The second worst-hit council is the Medical Research Council, which loses some £11 million.

"It is disturbing that the science budget is vulnerable in this way," says Martin Rees, president of the Royal Society in London. He called the decision, by the Department of Trade and Industry, "a worrying message about the priority accorded to science" in Britain.

## New Horizons head named as NASA science boss

NASA will have a new lead space scientist on 2 April, when planetary scientist Alan Stern, of the Southwest Research Institute



Change on the horizon: Alan Stern will become NASA's chief space scientist in April.

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in Boulder, Colorado, takes over from Mary Cleave as the agency's associate administrator for space science.

Cleave, a former astronaut, had struggled to cope with increasing cuts to the agency's science budget. Many in the community now praise the appointment of Stern, who has a long history with NASA, including flying imaging instruments aboard the space shuttle (see *Nature* 436, 618–619; 2005).

Stern will also continue to serve as principal investigator for the New Horizons spacecraft, which was scheduled to fly past Jupiter on 28 February on its way to a 2015 flyby of Pluto. In a deal worked out by NASA chief Michael Griffin, Stern will not deal as associate administrator with any matters involving New Horizons.

## South Africa doubles its science budget

South Africa's finance minister Trevor Manuel announced on 21 February that the nation has more than doubled its science budget. In the fiscal year 2007–08, the government will spend US\$450 million on research, up from about \$200 million last year. Next year, the budget is expected to increase by a further 16%, which should enable South Africa to meet the target set by the African Union of spending 1% of its gross domestic product on research and development.

The money for this year includes \$14 million to allow institutions to share information over a cheap broadband network; \$9 million for research chairs at universities; and \$11 million for the Karoo Array Telescope, a prototype for the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope. South Africa is competing against Australia to host the SKA, and an extra \$64 million has been set aside between 2008 and 2010 should South Africa's bid be successful.

ESA

## Blue Mars

Martian clouds appear an incandescent blue in this image taken by the European Space Agency's Rosetta spacecraft.

On 25 February, Rosetta came to within 250 kilometres of the martian surface on its way to Comet 67/P Churyumov-Gerasimenko, where it is expected to arrive in 2014.

On the way, though, it snapped a series of close-up shots of Mars. This false-colour image from the wide-angled camera in Rosetta's Optical, Spectroscopic, and Infrared Remote Imaging System (OSIRIS) is enhanced in the ultraviolet, bringing out details of the martian cloud systems.

