## NIH in the dark over conflicts of interest

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) relies on an honour system that leaves it unaware of the details of situations in which its external grantees have financial conflicts of interest, according to a report released on 17 January.

The report, from the inspector-general of the Department of Health and Human Services, found that nearly half of the NIH's 24 grant-making institutes and centres were unable to provide any of the financial disclosure reports they received from external institutions between 2004 and 2006. Of the 438 reports that were produced, 89% were devoid of details describing the conflicts or how they were being managed.

Such details are not required under current rules; the report recommended that this change. But the NIH disputed that advice, saying that if it agreed to accept detailed reports, it would be held accountable for oversight duties that are properly the job of grantees' institutions.

T. DELFATTI/AUSTRALIAN ANTARCTIC DIVISION

A plane sits on the new ice runway in Antarctica.

## Ice runway knocks weeks off journey to Antarctica

The first scheduled air link between Antarctica and Australia opened this month, giving Australian researchers a 4.5-hour trip to the frozen continent. Until now, they have had to travel for weeks by sea.

The first passenger flight carrying scientists landed on 11 January on a blue ice runway some 60 kilometres from the Casey research station. The initial trip made by air included researchers studying penguin ecology, and more than 20 scientists are expected to travel to Antarctica using the new flight path by the end of January.

The air link, which is operational between October and February, will run at least 10 flights a year. The Airbus A319 is fitted with long-range fuel tanks to allow it to travel to and fro without refuelling in Antarctica.

## Government abandons bid to save US jaguars

S. WIDSTRAND/NATUREPL.COM

The US government will not attempt to save jaguars from extinction within the formal system of the Endangered Species Act.

The jaguar (*Panthera onca*, pictured) once ranged across the southern United States, but later essentially vanished, with the exception of a few males that have been seen slinking through New Mexico and Arizona during the past few decades. These outliers, according to a decision released on 17 January by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, do not justify a formal "recovery plan". The agency says that it will instead work on behalf of the endangered cat with other countries south of the border that comprise the rest of the animal's range.

"What is really important is to focus on the jaguars where they are," says Elizabeth Slown, spokeswoman for the agency's southwest office in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "I don't want people to think we are abandoning the jaguar." Environmental groups say the government is doing just that. Kieran Suckling, policy director of the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, called the move "a death sentence".

## Early-stage human embryos cloned from adult cells

A Californian company says it has brought human cloning research to a new level with the efficient production of five cloned early-stage human embryos called blastocysts from adult skin cells.

Stemagen, which is based in La Jolla, hopes that its achievement will lead to the use of cloning techniques for biomedical research and, potentially, therapy. But first it will need to go the next step — using cells from a patient to generate blastocysts and then establish self-propagating lines of embryonic stem cells that, as clones, would be genetically identical to the patient.

Cloned human blastocysts have been reported before, but previously they have been made from human embryonic stem cells. The findings were reported last week in *Stem Cells* (A. French *et al. Stem Cells* doi:10.1634/stemcells.2007-0252; 2008).

## UK government under pressure over physics cuts

The UK government is being forced to defend its funding levels for physics. Research grants are expected to be cut by at least 25% despite a budget increase of 13.6% over three years for the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), which awards physics funding.

Documents obtained through the freedom of information act by a group of concerned physicists show that the STFC warned the government in advance that such cuts would mean fewer grants and reduced operation of key facilities.

Giving evidence to an inquiry on 21 January, Ian Diamond, head of Research Councils UK, the umbrella group for the country's research-funding councils, said the STFC would not be the only council affected by the budget changes. "I suspect there will be reductions in success rates [for research applications] across the board," he said.

## European registry makes stem-cell use transparent

Europe has launched a registry to give researchers, regulators and the general public access to broad information about all available human embryonic stem-cell lines developed in Europe and their use.

Sponsored by the European Commission, the European Human Embryonic Stem Cell Registry went live on 18 January at www.hescreg.eu.

The repository will provide an efficient research tool. But the commission also hopes that it will make use of the ethically sensitive cell lines fully transparent in a region where each nation has different regulations. For example, scientists may derive new stem-cell lines from embryos if they are based in Britain, but not if they are in Germany, where the registry will be hosted.

Scientists involved in the project say that sharing information and materials may help limit the number of new lines generated.