



PATHOGEN PROBLEMS
Budget woes for top UK
biocontainment laboratory.
www.nature.com/news

Det Norske Veritas says that it is surprised by the board's strong reaction, and promised immediate action to regain its accreditation. "It is very unfortunate, but we don't want to start arguing about the decision," says Tore Høifødt, a senior vice-president and director of corporate communication for the company. "We feel that CDM, an emerging business, is still under development. We do have the required competencies, but we accept that we have to improve."

While suspended, Det Norske Veritas cannot propose new CDM projects to the UN for formal approval. Høifødt says that 20–30 projects currently in the process of validation are likely to be delayed, and that the company will not take on new projects for as long as the suspension is valid. It will continue to validate and verify ongoing projects.

Critics of CDM have long warned of possible conflicts of interest, pointing out that private companies such as Det Norske Veritas have a business interest in not deterring customers by being too critical about proposed projects.

The environmental campaign group International Rivers, based in Berkeley, California, for example, claims that firms such as Det Norske Veritas and the Munich-based TÜV-SÜD Group, the largest German verifying company, have been too lax in their assessment of the social and environmental impacts of hydropower projects in India and China.

The companies reject these accusations. "Our reviews, such as of the Xiaoxi hydropower project in China, are carried out in agreement with guidelines set up by the World Commission on Dams," says Thomas Oberst, a spokesman for TÜV-SÜD. The company has not yet had a spot check by the CDM executive board, but expects one very soon, he adds.

Since 2005, when the Kyoto Protocol came into force, CDM projects under way in 51 countries are thought to have saved some 250 million tonnes in greenhouse-gas emissions. The UN hopes that the scheme will help to abate almost 3 billion tonnes by the end of 2012, when the Kyoto Protocol is due to be replaced by a new treaty, currently being debated at Poznań.

But analysts say that ensuring reliable verification is a serious problem, and that the decision to suspend the largest player sends a powerful signal to others in the business.

"The UN has made clear it won't stand for lax validation," says Martin Kruska, a CDM expert with the First Climate Group, a carbon-trading consultancy near Frankfurt, Germany. "This is a warning not to be ignored."

Quirin Schiermeier

For a blow-by-blow report of the Poznań conference, see <http://tinyurl.com/6edhzj>.

Kansas wins race to host biodefence research centre

The US government is to put its \$563-million National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) in Manhattan, Kansas. The bid from Kansas State University beat four university-linked applicants to replace the ageing Plum Island Animal Disease Center in Greenport, New York, as the leading national research centre on the most dangerous animal diseases.

But hiring the 300 or so trained researchers and support personnel needed for the centre and its biosafety level-4 (BSL-4) laboratory will be a stiff challenge — especially as the number of biocontainment facilities is rising nationwide.

Sixteen months ago, Kansas State University finished building 21 BSL-3 labs as part of its \$54-million Biosecurity Research Institute. But no research is under way there yet as the state's government has frozen recruitment, and only a few dozen staff members are preparing to be certified to work in the labs.

The concept behind the Biosecurity Research Institute was "build it and they would come", says its interim director Beth Montelone. University officials had hoped that biotech businesses or outside researchers would use the labs on a fee-for-service basis. Officials now hope that some Plum Island labs may move their research there before the NBAF is completed in 2014.

The other university-oriented bids to host the NBAF came from Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas. The race had its roots in the anthrax terrorist attacks of 2001, after which the US government went on a spending spree to develop new biosecurity research complexes. It built one BSL-4 lab in Galveston, Texas, which was dedicated last month, and another is under construction in Boston, Massachusetts.

The Department of Homeland Security has also funded a series of 13 regional facilities of BSL-3 labs — in 2003, Kansas State University lost out to the University of Missouri for one of those. Last week, Kansas politicians began talking of their success in securing the NBAF before federal officials had announced their decision. Senator Pat Roberts (Republican, Kansas) boasted of his lobbying on his website. He was instrumental in earlier pushing through a federal \$11-million appropriation for the Biosecurity Research Institute, which is housed in a hall named after him.

The inclusion in the NBAF shortlist of



Pat Roberts has supported Kansas State.

D. MAYES, K-STATE PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES

Mississippi — a site that ranked poorly in an initial review of 18 sites — raised some questions about the selection process. Asked if the final selection was political or scientific, Ron Trewyn, Kansas State University's vice-president for research, said: "I am very comfortable saying this was a scientific decision."

In its bid, the university highlighted that it has a veterinary college and BSL-3 labs that can accommodate animals up to 400 kilograms. It also flagged up the presence of the renowned husband-and-wife team of veterinarians Nancy and Jerry Jaax, and Juergen Richt, an expert in zoonoses who was hired last summer from a US Department of Agriculture facility in Iowa.

But even the best laid plans can't account for everything. In Texas, the new Galveston National Laboratory and its BSL-4 lab physically survived the devastation of Hurricane Ike in September — although its host institution, the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), was forced to close temporarily with an estimated \$700 million in damage. Nearly 4,000 people were laid off — mostly clinical personnel but also some 125 research-oriented staff, including the attorney who handles biosecurity issues for the Galveston lab. Last week, some of those laid off filed a lawsuit to get their jobs back.

Even after Ike, the Texas lab is expected to become operational next year; the Boston facility should follow soon after. To help cope with the rising demand, both UTMB and Kansas State University have recently launched programmes to train more workers for biosecurity labs. Whether it will be enough remains to be seen.

Rex Dalton