

Medical charity folds after investment losses

The Picower Foundation, a large US charity that funds medical research, has collapsed after losing money in a fraudulent US\$50-billion (£34-million) investment scheme run by businessman Bernard Madoff.

The Florida-based foundation was set up in 1989 and had distributed a total of \$268 million in grants, including a \$50-million donation in 2002 to fund the Picower Institute for Learning and Memory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. The foundation had assets of \$1 billion invested in Madoff's scheme, and it is unclear whether any of these funds will be recovered.

Other organizations hit by the fraud include Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, which had put \$20 million into the scheme, and the American Technion Society, a science-education charity in New York, which had made a \$72-million investment.

Spanish solar companies slammed over subsidy fraud

Many of the solar parks that stretch across the Spanish countryside are guilty of fraud, Spain's National Energy Commission (CNE) has found.

In the past two years, Spain's solar industry has grown by 900%. The country now has the third-largest solar capacity in the world, behind the United States and Germany. But the CNE's investigation has found that nearly 4,200 photovoltaic installations, found on 13% of Spain's solar parks, were falsely registered as producing power by 30 September 2008 in order to receive greater subsidies from power companies.

Industry analysts are concerned that the fraudulent installations have effectively

First antenna switches on in the Atacama

The Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) — a radio telescope — has received the first of its 12-metre-wide radio antennas (pictured). The project is a multinational collaboration with a cost well in excess of US\$1 billion. It will eventually consist of 54 identical antennas — along with 12 seven-metre antennas — at a site 5,000 metres above sea level in Chile's Atacama Desert.

ALMA will be used to study the Universe at millimetre and submillimetre wavelengths, providing a new window on the cool star-forming regions of the Milky Way and on early galaxies. Further antennas should be delivered throughout 2009, and the entire array is expected to be completed by the end of 2012 (see page 18).



ALMA (ESO/NAOJ/NRAO)

used up the subsidies anticipated for 2009 — and on 17 December the government postponed a round of awards planned for January until 1 March.

For a longer version of this story, see <http://tinyurl.com/9nxa5h>.

US firms power up to build advanced batteries

Fourteen US companies have formed a coalition to make advanced lithium-ion batteries for vehicles. The National Alliance for Advanced Transportation Battery Cell Manufacture is proposing to build one or more large manufacturing plants that would be shared by its members.

Members of the alliance include Altair Nanotechnologies of Reno, Nevada, 3M of Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Johnson Controls-Saft, a joint American-French battery-production enterprise. The US Department of Energy's Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois will have an advisory role. The alliance is seeking government support for the majority of the venture, estimated to cost between \$1 billion and \$2 billion over five years.

Health organization lays plans for major biobank

Health-care provider Kaiser Permanente based in Oakland, California, is building a biobank that could rival the world's largest in size and scope. The organization has received a grant of US\$8.6 million from the philanthropic Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, to collect DNA specimens from 200,000 people enrolled in Kaiser's medical-care plan.

Kaiser will link the DNA to participants'

existing electronic medical records and to a planned database of environmental information, with the aim of reaching a total of 500,000 participants by 2012 — making it much larger than any other current biobank in the United States. The data will be available to researchers around the world for studying how genes and other factors influence disease risk and health.

For a longer version of this story, see <http://tinyurl.com/9bvr5d>.

NASA awards contracts to supply space station

Orbital Sciences of Dulles, Virginia, and Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) of Hawthorne, California, have secured contracts from NASA to ferry cargo to the International Space Station (ISS) from 2010.

The contracts, which could each be worth up to US\$3.1 billion, will see the private carriers supply 40–70% of the space station's US cargo each year until the end of 2016. The firms will be stepping into the breach left when NASA retires its space shuttles in 2010.

In September 2008, SpaceX launched the first privately developed liquid-fuel rocket and its cargo into low Earth orbit. The company's ISS deliveries will probably be made with Falcon 9, a larger version of the rocket, which is expected to make its first launch within months.

Correction

The News Feature 'Phoenix: a race against time' (*Nature* 456, 690–695, 2008) suggested that Honeybee Robotics failed to follow revised designs that would have corrected a flaw in a part of the NASA Phoenix spacecraft. A subsequent investigation by mission managers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory found that Honeybee was not at fault. See Correspondence, page 26.



Subsidies may run short for Spain's solar parks.