NEWS

Biodefence lab criticized

US lawmakers investigate site choice of planned facility.

The US government's decision to locate a new national biosecurity lab in Manhattan, Kansas, has been called into question by a congressional watchdog. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) relied on a flawed risk assessment when deciding the location of the US$650-million National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility.

Last December the DHS chose Kansas State University as the site of a high-containment lab to replace the Plum Island Animal Disease Center in New York state.

But the GAO found that the department used "unrepresentative accident scenarios", "outdated modelling", and "inadequate" information in assessing the chance that highly contagious pathogens might be accidentally released from the facility, according to a draft of the report obtained by *The Washington Post*. The full report was scheduled to be released on 30 July, to coincide with a hearing convened by the House Committee on Energy and Commerce's oversight and investigations subcommittee.

The GAO says that the DHS's environmental impact statement, prepared for all six finalist sites, did not adequately evaluate worst-case scenarios.

Matthew Chandler, a DHS spokesman, defended the agency's site selection process as open, fair and safe. "We stand by our process," he says. A GAO spokeswoman declined to comment on the draft report.

"We have the technology to work with these agents safely."

Jerry Jaax, Kansas State University's associate vice-president for research compliance, says that concerns about placing the high-containment lab on the US mainland are "outmoded". He says that no problems have been found at other mainland disease facilities operating at the highest biosecurity level, such as those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, and the DHS's biodefence lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland. In addition, worries over a risk of tornados at the site are "disingenuous and stupid", he says. "The safest place in the case of a tornado would be one of these facilities."

A planned biosecurity facility in Kansas will conduct animal-disease research.

P. SCHERMEISTER/CORBIS

Michael Guiffré, a partner at law firm Patton Boggs in Washington DC who represents a consortium seeking to site the biosecurity lab in San Antonio, Texas, applauded the report and called for a full comparison of

Physicians fight back against disclosure rules

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Even as US legislators work to limit ties between academic physicians and industry, a small group of doctors is calling for greater industry collaboration. On 23 July, they gathered at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston to launch a new organization opposed to strict conflict-of-interest rules.

The Association of Clinical Researchers and Educators (ACRE) is the brainchild of Thomas Stossel, a haematologist at Harvard Medical School. Stossel has been a vocal critic of conflict-of-interest rules since the late 1980s, when he was on the board of the Cambridge-based biotech firm Biogen and Harvard adopted its first conflict-of-interest policy.

"Tom, for many years, was pretty much the lone voice," says Laurence Hirsch, an endocrinologist with the medical-technology firm BD in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey.

Now, however, Stossel has company. He and the five other physicians who lead ACRE argue that they are part of a "silent majority" who think the move to curtail physician–industry relations has gone too far. In Massachusetts, a law came into effect on 1 July that requires drug and medical-device manufacturers to inform the state health department about payments of $50 or more made to physicians for marketing activities; gifts are banned. Vermont has adopted a tougher law, and Congress is considering legislation that would set up a national reporting requirement.

Thomas Stossel: vocal critic of conflict-of-interest rules.

S. G. HENRY

ACRE does not yet oppose specific laws, it says, but rather the climate of distrust it claims tough conflict-of-interest rules create. The notion that a physician is automatically tainted by financial interest in a company is "obnoxious", says Michael Weber, a cardiologist at the State University of New York Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, and a member of ACRE's steering committee. "Just because something is good for industry doesn't mean it has to be bad for everyone else."

Still, last year, a congressional investigation revealed that three Harvard psychiatrists had reported to their university only a fraction of the million or more dollars each received from drug companies. And psychiatrist Charles Nemeroff of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, stepped down after the same probe uncovered that he failed to report at least $1.2 million he earned from drug companies. "I do not believe that a physician that takes more than a million dollars in money from industry can possibly be objective," says cardiologist Steven Nissen of the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, a strong supporter of curbing industry–physician ties.

Not all instances are so clear-cut, argued some at the ACRE meeting. After Hurricane Ike destroyed the cafeteria and much of the first

the safety merits of the various applicants. "If a thorough risk assessment was completed that analysed the relative risks of conducting this research at various sites, then ultimately the DHS would conclude that Texas is the safer location," he says, arguing that Kansas poses a bigger danger of severe tornadoes.

In light of the GAO report, critics are questioning whether the DHS should go back to the drawing board to reconsider a new offshore site to replace the 55-year-old facility on Plum Island. "A careful and comprehensive assessment of risk has not been made," says Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey. "It's time for those policies to be reconsidered."

But many biosecurity experts point out that disease centres in other countries, such as the Canadian National Centre for Foreign Animal Disease in Winnipeg, operate efficiently and safely in mainland locations. "We have the technology to work with these agents safely in containment," says Corrie Brown, a veterinary pathologist at the University of Georgia in Athens who was interviewed by the GAO for its report.

However, disease outbreaks are not unprecedented. In 2001, a leak at an ageing UK animal-research lab in Pirbright led to an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that required the slaughter of 6 million livestock. This week, the British government announced a £100-million (US$165-million) upgrade to the facility. ■

Elie Dolgin

floor of a University of Texas Medical Branch hospital in Galveston, Avi Markowitz, chief of oncology and haematology, agreed to allow the pharmaceutical industry to provide food for the staff. When hospital officials found out, Markowitz says, they told him to stop, as it contravened university policy. "They had no problem at all letting the students, the trainees and the staff go hungry," he says.

At the meeting, similar frustration was palpable. One attendee complained that he couldn't buy a $12 hamburger for a consultant who had agreed to speak for free. "They're giving us a pro bono service and we're going to ask them to pay for their own lunch?" he lamented.

Stossel and other ACRE leaders argue that stringent policies call into question physicians' integrity. The gift ban, for instance, suggests that physicians "have a corruption problem", he says.

Nissen acknowledges that academics and industry need to work together, but he says firewalls are needed between the two. "When money becomes involved, it no longer becomes a scientific collaboration but a commercial one," he says. "So transparency is an absolute minimum."

"The notion that a physician is automatically tainted by financial interest in a company is obnoxious."

Markowitz points out that restrictive rules won't stop misconduct. He says the new conflict-of-interest rules are like "cutting off everyone's hands to prevent stealing". Rather than focusing on "up-front prohibition", Stossel says, institutions should "emphasize vigilance and punishment".

ACRE's membership is small, with only about 100 people. And the group has not yet decided whether to allow industry employees as members.

For now, at least, funding comes from its $200 annual membership fee. Accordingly, the kick-off gathering was far from opulent. At lunchtime, participants gathered at folding tables to eat ham sandwiches and potato crisps.

Weber says the next step is to come up with a proactive code of conduct outlining ethical interactions. "If we can't say what would be appropriate," he says, "then we don't have a position at all." ■

Cassandra Willyard

K. CAMPBELL/GETTY

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European body told to cut free

The European Commission must make "immediate corrections" to the running of the European Research Council (ERC) or risk the body suffering a "deadly blow", an expert review has found.

On 23 July, a panel led by the former president of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, published a review of the ERC — the first pan-European initiative to fund frontier research solely on the basis of excellence.

The ERC was established two years ago and is administered by an executive agency under the commission's control. The panel describes the council's management as a source of "great frustration and low-level conflict".

It recommends recruiting a top scientist with managerial experience from outside the commission to run the executive agency, replacing the commission's current appointee. The review says that existing rules preventing such an appointment should be "urgently remedied".

"Cumbersome" regulations and financial controls imposed on the ERC could prevent the council becoming a world-class institution, the review says. Sources of frustration include funding coming as contracts rather than grants, requiring researchers to document in detail time spent working on ERC-funded projects (see *Nature* 460, 440–441; 2009). The review calls for the ERC to be allowed to award grants, giving researchers greater flexibility.

Rules requiring reviewers to provide formal identification discourage participation, the review says. It calls on the commission to put in place rules based on "trust and not suspicion and mistrust".

The review says these changes must be made over the coming year. A follow-up review should take place in 2011 to ensure improvements have been made. If they have not, the ERC should become independent from the commission, the panel says.

Janez Potočnik, the research commissioner, said in a statement that the recommendations "coincide with [the] commission's own conclusions" on the ERC. "I believe that we will be able to respond positively to the substance of most recommendations," he says.

The commission's official response to the review is due in October. ■

Natasha Gilbert

India embarks on push to become a solar power

India's prime minister Manmohan Singh has unveiled a 30-year, US$19-billion plan to make the country a leader in solar energy.

Announced on 3 August, the programme aims to raise installed solar capacity from its current 5 MW to 20 GW by 2020, 100 GW by 2030 and 200 GW by 2050, although a detailed road map has been drawn up to 2020 only. An autonomous solar-energy authority will be created to execute the mission, and the existing solar-energy centre near New Delhi will be upgraded to an institute that will coordinate solar-research centres across the country and promote foreign collaboration — a key feature of the plan.

Industry carrots include tax credits and priority bank loans for solar-power projects, as well as the duty-free import of raw materials. And conventional power plants with steam-driven turbines will have to generate at least 5% of their capacity from solar power.

For a longer version of this story, see http://tiny.cc/iem9l

Lab worker charged with destroying protein crystals

A former employee who allegedly destroyed US$500,000 worth of protein crystal samples at the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory in Menlo Park, California, was arrested and charged last week with wilfully ruining government property.

Silvya Oommachen, until July a research associate at SLAC's Joint Center for Structural Genomics (JCSG), removed 4,000–5,000 protein crystals from three SLAC freezers at some point between 17 and 20 July, according to an FBI affidavit.

The now-useless crystals formed part of the Protein Structure Initiative, a federally funded project to expedite the discovery of atomic-level protein structures. JCSG director Ian Wilson estimates that his research team now faces a "two- to three-month setback" to remake the protein crystals that had not yet been analysed.

For a longer version of this story, see http://tinyurl.com/lfnj43

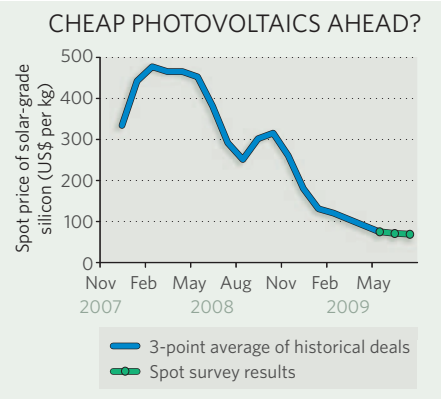
Plummeting silicon prices may boost solar sales

The price of silicon for the solar-power industry has plunged in the past year as a result of increasing supplies and a sharp drop in demand, with the price of silicon photovoltaic panels poised to follow.

The spot price of solar-grade silicon — for immediate delivery — has fallen by roughly 77%, from an average of more than US$300 per kilogram last year to $67 per kilogram today, according to the London-based consultancy New Energy Finance (see graph).

That has forced silicon and wafer suppliers to renegotiate contracts signed last year for delivery this year. Contracts signed at $150 per kilogram have been cancelled or renegotiated at roughly 50% discount.

Even before the global financial crisis, analysts had warned that supplies would outstrip demand in 2009, with new manufacturing facilities coming online at a time when countries such as Spain are scaling back solar subsidies. The good news for solar manufacturers, the consultancy reports, is that they should be able to halve the price of panels, which should spur demand.



SOURCE: NEW ENERGY FINANCE

US report backs distinction between science and policy

In setting regulatory policy, the US government should do more to separate scientific advice from policy decisions based on that advice, according to a report released on 5 August by the Bipartisan Policy Center, a non-profit body based in Washington DC established by former Democratic and Republican members of Congress.

The report recommends that regulatory agencies should post public notices that distinguish between the science and policy questions being asked. In appointing scientific advisory panels, agencies should adopt more stringent requirements about financial and professional conflicts of interest, and should be more transparent in disclosing them, it says. The report has been reviewed by the administration of President Barack Obama, who condemned the politicization of science in March, and is expected to issue guidelines on these issues later this year.

Chikyu showcases riser drilling for deep-sea research

IODP/JAMSTEC

The first scientific ocean-floor drilling project to use a riser drill — equipment previously used in oil exploration — was completed last week.

The Japanese research vessel *Chikyu* (pictured) drilled 1,600 metres below the sea floor of the Nankai Trough, an earthquake-generating zone off the Pacific coast of Japan.

Riser drilling circulates mud in an extra casing around the drill to prevent the collapse of a borehole in deep, high-pressure zones. *Chikyu* had already tested its riser-drilling equipment while on loan to an Australian oil company (see *Nature* **442,** 964; 2006).

The vessel is taking a leading role in the Integrated Ocean Drilling Program, a collaboration of Japanese, US and European scientists studying rock and sediment samples to learn about Earth's structure and history. It is due to drill two more sites in the Nankai Trough.

Corrections

The News story 'Biodefence lab criticized' (*Nature* **460,** 556–557; 2009) conflated two different foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks in Britain. The 2001 outbreak required the slaughter of 6 million animals; a 2007 outbreak originated from the animal-research lab in Pirbright.

The News story 'Flu jabs urged for developing countries' (*Nature* **460,** 156–157; 2009) incorrectly stated that Abdullah Brooks has determined that one-third of pneumonia deaths in children younger than 2 years old in Bangladesh can be attributed to the influenza virus. In fact, he has determined that about one-third of children who get influenza develop pneumonia, of whom about two-thirds are less than two years old.