

Brookhaven reactor decision delayed another six months

[WASHINGTON] Prospects for the reopening of a troubled research reactor at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York State have receded yet further, raising the prospect that it may never reopen.

The Department of Energy last week told local representatives that the decision about whether to reopen the High Flux Beam Reactor has been pushed back from December this year to May 1999. The problem dates back to January 1997 when the reactor was closed following leakage of tritium from a waste storage tank (see *Nature* 386, 3; 1997).

Local politicians have strongly opposed the reopening of the reactor, which was an important source of neutrons for researchers in the north-eastern United States.

The department says it has received almost 600 comments on an assessment it is preparing on the environmental impact of the reactor, and needs time to digest them. It also said last week that it would comply with a demand from Congress and bring in an outside regulator — the Nuclear Regulatory Commission — to “conduct a comprehensive safety and compliance review” of the reactor.

OECD counts costs of CO₂ emission controls

[LONDON] Stabilizing carbon dioxide emissions at their present levels could cost up to 2 per cent of the world's gross domestic product, according to a report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). On the other hand, no action to reduce emissions will cause them to increase three-fold by 2050.

The figures are contained in the OECD's latest *Economic Outlook*. The report calls for developing countries to reduce their emissions, but acknowledges that a way has to be found to divide the costs of environmental protection between the wealthier polluters and developing countries.

Spanish telescope attracts interest

[MUNICH] Following the decision by the Spanish government to finally commit itself to funding a ten-metre optical telescope in the Canary Islands (see *Nature* 392, 852; 1998), the project has now received a number of formal requests to participate.

Potential partners include the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Mexico and India, whose joint contributions would cover 35 per cent of total costs. This is the maximum level of participation permitted in

the programme, intended to bring Spanish astronomy up to international levels.

Vanderbilt settles in anaemia cases

[WASHINGTON] Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, last week reached a preliminary settlement of \$10 million in a class action lawsuit brought by pregnant women who were given radioactive tracers fifty years ago and their relatives.

More than 800 women took part in studies of iron-deficiency anaemia sponsored by the university and the Tennessee Department of Health between 1945 and 1949. The university will pay them and their surviving relatives \$9.1 million; the Rockefeller Foundation, which also funded the studies, will pay the remainder.

The plaintiffs claimed that they and their children suffered because of the experiments, in which women at the Vanderbilt Prenatal Clinic ingested radioactive iron. But Jeff Carr, Vanderbilt's general counsel, said the studies contributed to the scientific understanding and prevention of “a significant nutritional problem at the time”.

Questions raised over fenfluramine tests

[WASHINGTON] The chairman of a congressional committee has launched an investigation into how the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Food and Drug Administration approved non-therapeutic experiments with fenfluramine, a now-banned diet drug, in children in New York (see *Nature* 392, 747 & 853; 1998).

In a letter to Harold Varmus, the head of the NIH, Dan Burton (Republican, Indiana), chairman of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, says that, in general, normal, healthy children are not supposed to be subjected to non-therapeutic, potentially dangerous experimental research. He also wants to know why research showing that therapeutic doses of fenfluramine can cause severe and sometimes permanent impairment in serotonin nerve cells in animals “[was] ignored, or how was it excused?”

Fusion reactor redesign ‘could halve costs’

[TOKYO] A new set of design parameters for the planned International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) has been proposed by a working group set up in February to investigate ways of cutting costs by relaxing some of the technical objectives (see *Nature* 391, 833; 1998).

At a meeting last week in Naka, Japan, the working group agreed that the estimated

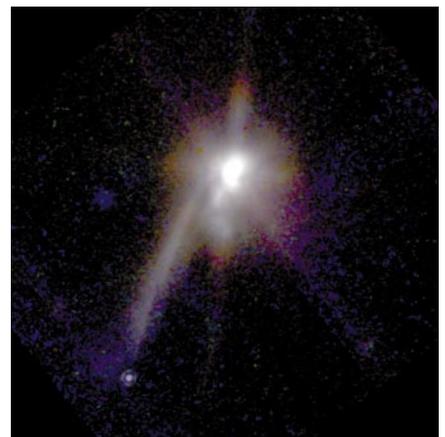
US\$10 billion cost could be cut by up to half by reducing the radius of ITER's doughnut-shaped confinement vessel from 8 metres to 6 metres and by making various other changes. Although the new design parameters may no longer be sufficient to achieve ignition, the working group said it was confident that they would still allow many of the reactor's main technical goals to be met. The proposals will be discussed at the ITER council in Tokyo this month.

Emperor honoured by Britain's Royal Society

[LONDON] Emperor Akihito of Japan, an active scientist who has published extensively on the Japanese gobi fish and been closely associated with the support of science in Japan, was last week awarded the Royal Society's first King Charles II medal during a state visit to Britain.

The medal has been instigated by the society to give recognition to foreign heads of state “who have made an exceptional contribution to the promotion of science and its place in society”. Emperor Akihito has been closely involved with meetings of the Japan Academy, as well as major international awards such as the Japan prize and the Kyoto prize.

Small companion raises some big questions



[WASHINGTON] Planet, brown dwarf, or something else? Whatever TMR-1C is, astronomers have not seen anything like it before. Susan Terebey of the Extrasolar Research Corporation in Pasadena, California, was using the Hubble Space Telescope to study star formation in Taurus when she turned up this near-infrared image of a binary protostar with a jet of material pointing towards a small companion object (lower left). Terebey and her colleagues believe the object was gravitationally ejected from the system, and is most likely a newly formed planet about two to three times the mass of Jupiter. Ground-based spectroscopy should help settle the question of its origin.

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