

Clinton's ocean agenda offers modest treasures for science

[WASHINGTON] President Bill Clinton last week proposed a broad \$224 million package to protect and restore ocean resources — although it included only modest increases in funding for oceanographic research.

Speaking at a two-day National Ocean Conference in Monterey, California, Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore promised to extend a ban on offshore oil drilling to cover most of the US coastline and to set up an \$800 million trust fund to modernize US ports. They pledged to strengthen protection of coral reefs and to create a permanent oceans commission to coordinate federal policy.

Most of the money — \$194 million — would go into a five-year programme to rebuild and sustain marine fisheries, including the acquisition of three research vessels to provide better data on fish stocks.

An additional \$4 million a year would be spent between 2000 and 2002 on a variety of exploration and research projects. These would include building two new unmanned deep-sea observatories on the Juan de Fuca ridge off the US west coast and in the Gulf of Mexico, and expanding existing shallow-water observatories in Florida and on the continental shelf off New Jersey.



A drop in the ocean: Clinton (front) and Gore pledge little to further these students' research.

The plans also include developing, in partnership with industry, two new submersible vehicles, which will be leased by the government and made available to members of the scientific community.

Another \$12 million would be allocated to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in order to place hundreds of instrumented buoys in the North Atlantic and North Pacific, beginning in 2000, as part of an expanded Global Ocean Observing System.

Clinton also promised to help speed up the release of classified military data, including underwater acoustical data from listening devices used to track submarines.

Some of the proposals merely reflect plans already under way in NOAA and other federal agencies, while others were still sketchy in their details.

Before the conference, agencies involved in ocean research were canvassed for ideas for future initiatives, which were then screened by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and Council on Environmental Quality before being sent on to Clinton and Gore.

But there was little consultation with the ocean science community, says Richard Spinrad, research director for the Consortium for Oceanographic Research and Education (CORE) in Washington.

Spinrad says the research component of the package unveiled in Monterey is "at best a good start" and was nowhere near the kind of investment needed to address the current shortage of observational data for the oceans.

CORE has argued that ocean sciences are chronically underfunded (see *Nature* 379, 283; 1996). Federal spending on oceanographic research has remained flat at about \$600 million a year (in constant dollars) for the past 15 years, while funding for research in general has doubled.

Realizing the research agenda outlined in an influential 1969 report by the Stratton Commission, which led to the creation of NOAA, would require about \$1 billion annually, says Spinrad. Still, he believes that the proposed oceans commission could provide a useful forum for ocean scientists to convey their needs.

Clinton last week asked his cabinet to produce recommendations for a coordinated oceans policy within a year, and said he plans to work with Congress to create the permanent commission.

Even if the initiatives put forth in Monterey were a disappointment, Spinrad takes heart that at least the president and vice-president acknowledged the need for more observational data. "If that message came across during the conference to the Administration and Congress, then that's a great message," he says.

Tony Reichardt

Call to drop charges in French blood affair

[PARIS] The French attorney general has called for all charges to be dropped against three former ministers accused of "collusion in poisoning" (see *Nature* 364, 269; 1993).

Former prime minister Laurent Fabius has been accused, with former deputy health minister Edmond Hervé and former social affairs minister Georgina Dufoix, of delaying the introduction of systematic screening of donated blood for HIV in 1985. He was said to have done this to protect the national market for a French AIDS test, marketed by Diagnostics Pasteur, when a US test from Abbott Laboratories was already available (see *Nature* 367, 673; 1994 & 371, 369; 1994).

But attorney general Jean-François Burgelin concludes that screening, introduced on 19 June 1985, began within a reasonable time, and ahead of many other countries, such as the United Kingdom, which started screening in autumn 1985. He praises Fabius for acting "decisively" in the absence of a clear consensus from the medical and scientific communities. The report criticizes their "passivity" in the face of the emergence of AIDS, and their failure to alert the government.

Hervé is criticized in the brief for

"blindness" and for having failed to take sufficient initiative. But Burgelin concludes that this did not constitute a crime.

The brief also challenges the claim that Abbott was in a position to supply the French market following approval of its test by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in March 1985. French investigators who visited Abbott's Chicago headquarters last year say the company could not provide evidence that this was the case, having destroyed archives relating to the period in line with its policy on expiration of archives.

Other documents raise doubts about the reliability of the Abbott test. A 1986 memo from the American Red Cross shows that the FDA had been warned that the Abbott test gave false negatives.

Meanwhile, the investigation of some 40 scientists and administrators already charged (see *Nature* 375, 526; 1995) is drawing to a close, with a decision on their trials expected soon. The investigating judge, Marie-Odile Bertella-Geffroy, had asked for the criminal investigations to be extended into a wider-ranging inquiry, but this was turned down last week by the public prosecutor's office.

Declan Butler