

## Environmental databases

# NOAA slipping further behind

*Washington*

THE attempts by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to bring up to date its overstretched environmental data archiving and distribution system have run into trouble. The agency's proposed new system, NOAAANET, is intended to supply retrospective environmental data from satellite and other sensors for researchers during the 1990s and into next century. But political obstacles have prevented NOAAANET from finding its way into the agency's budget for fiscal year 1988, which starts next October, and there are fears that the administration's outmoded technology could slip even further behind.

NOAAANET was cut out of the agency's 1987 budget by the Office of Management and Budget. This year, it did not even get that far: NOAA has been told by its parent agency, the Department of Commerce, to see whether the system could not be run by the private sector. Nonplussed NOAA officials say prospects for making a profit out of environmental data archives are not immediately clear.

Virtually all researchers agree that NOAA has fallen way behind in the push to computerize access to environmental data, even though it has a legal mandate to provide such an archive. Requests for data can take months to be processed, and there is no on-line catalogue, let alone data access. The problem will worsen as new advanced satellites will generate data in ever-increasing quantities. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), in contrast, although supposedly a research agency, has already established data centres with much more advanced capabilities and is starting to link them up. The new 'NASAnet' will enable researchers to examine catalogues of data from different sensors across various disciplines and make selections from their computer terminals.

The difficulties result, some say, from NOAA's disadvantaged position within the Department of Commerce. The department's bureaucrats are less likely to be sympathetic to projects benefiting research than to those of NASA, for example. NASA's initiatives to make use of computers for data handling and distribution have been generously funded: the agency recently signed a \$240 million contract with Boeing Computer Services for project support for a new network.

There are nevertheless those who are critical of NOAA's preliminary plans for NOAAANET. Frank Eden of the Joint Oceanographic Institution questions whether there have been adequate consultations with NASA and the National Science Foundation, for example, which is

also constructing a large computer network based around its five supercomputer centres.

The lack of a formal scientific advisory body to advise NOAA on how to implement the project is also a source of concern. But Gregory W. Hunolt, NOAAANET project manager, says NOAA plans to bring in external advice

## AIDS

# WHO plans megaprogramme

*Washington*

THE World Health Organization (WHO) last week said that prevention and control of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) has become one of its top priorities and that efforts to combat the disease need to be as urgent as those against smallpox in the 1950s. WHO estimates there will be between 500,000 and 3 million AIDS cases by 1991, with up to 100 million people infected with the virus.

Dr Jonathan Mann, head of WHO's AIDS programme, says those figures could be serious underestimates if AIDS spreads quickly in Asia and in South

## India screens foreign students for AIDS

*New Delhi*

**MEDICAL screening for AIDS has been made compulsory for all foreign students seeking admission to Indian educational institutions. Under the new guidelines from the health ministry, foreign students provisionally admitted may be liable for deportation if tests confirm the presence of antibodies to human immune deficiency virus (HIV).**

The government directive was issued last month after the detection of HIV antibodies in an African student in Madras. He is the only male seropositive case among 22 cases so far identified in the city.

India has an estimated 30,000 foreign students, mostly from Africa and eastern Asia. AIDS screening has been proposed for fresh admissions, but is likely to be made mandatory for foreign students already here. The Indian Council of Medical Research has set up 19 centres to screen sera using imported ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) kits.

There have so far been three deaths from AIDS in India — two of the patients had received blood transfusions in the United States and one was an Indian settled in Malawi. Some 30 antibody-positive cases, most of them prostitutes, are under observation.

K. S. Jayaraman

shortly; meetings with NASA have already started and a definition document has been circulated in the academic community. High-level contacts between the agencies had been delayed by a NOAA proposal to put its orbiting meteorological instruments on a private satellite, Omnistar, but that idea has now been dropped. But without a commitment by the Department of Commerce to seek the several tens of millions of dollars that NOAAANET would cost, progress seems unlikely.

Tim Beardsley

America. WHO estimates the worldwide cost of fighting the disease at \$12,500 million by the early 1990s.

The WHO AIDS programme officially started in May of this year, and has already raised \$4.5 million in special contributions from member governments. The agency is seeking to raise \$200 million for next year. By next decade it wants \$1,500 million a year, 50 per cent more than its entire budget at present.

WHO will concentrate on the exchange of information among researchers working on prevention and therapy, as well on direct assistance to countries needing to set up their own control programmes. The research component will include coordination of vaccine field trials and the establishment of an international virus bank.

Mann estimates that about 100 countries will need technical assistance in setting up their own prevention and control programmes. These should be based on research on how the disease is transmitted and public education, and should include "hard-headed" social science research into the availability and usage of condoms and hypodermic needles, for example. WHO will also foster operational research into the development of cheap antibody testing for blood banks worldwide.

Tim Beardsley

- The British government last week launched a £20 million campaign to educate the public on the danger of AIDS. "Don't die of ignorance" is one of the slogans that are to confront the British public in a wave of publicity including television, radio and maildrop advertising. The campaign began this week with national newspaper advertisements.

At the end of the year, a month-long television campaign using a 40-second commercial will pave the way for the maildrop. In the new year the 23 million homes in the United Kingdom each receive a letter containing an explicit warning on the danger of AIDS.

A minute-long radio commercial will also be broadcast at the end of the year, narrated by a top disk jockey to attract the attention of the young.

Bill Johnstone