

US National Ignition Facility criticized by fellow laboratory

Washington Deep divisions between US nuclear weapons laboratories over the future of the troubled National Ignition Facility (NIF) fusion project spilled into public view last week. A senior official at the Sandia laboratory in New Mexico issued a statement questioning "what is a reasonable additional investment in the NIF".

The statement, from Sandia vice-president Tom Hunter, was quickly withdrawn by the laboratory and condemned by Bill Richardson, the energy secretary, who pledged to ignore it. But its contents confirmed growing concerns at Sandia and the Los Alamos National Laboratory, also in New Mexico, that cost overruns at the NIF could endanger other parts of the nuclear weapons research programme.

An unpublished report by the General Accounting Office says that the NIF's total construction cost, which was supposed to be \$1.2 billion, could reach as much as \$3.6 billion. Senator Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico) is strongly resisting efforts to help pay for the cost overruns from the budget of Sandia or Los Alamos.

Phenomenal result for Durham in particle physics

London Britain's University of Durham has beaten ten rivals from across the country to house a new £12 million (US\$17.6 million) Institute for Particle Physics Phenomenology. The institute will have a new building and 50 staff and research students, double the existing number. Durham is already home to one of the United Kingdom's largest groups of theoretical particle physicists.

Phenomenology is the bridge between theory and experiment in particle physics; the institute will test theories of the fundamental forces of physics and the structure of matter. The institute will be supported, for at least ten years, by the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and the university. Its first director is James Stirling.

Human gene map on schedule for autumn

Hay-on-Wye, Wales One of the leading figures in the Human Genome Project said last week-end that the publication of the full draft of the genome sequence was now expected "some-time this [autumn]". Eric Lander, director of the Whitehead Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, also said that the public was being "misled" by media descriptions of a race to the finishing line, stressing that much of the data produced by the



Under fire: Edward Moses, head of the troubled National Ignition Facility (see left).

sequencing project are "already being used in laboratories throughout the world".

Delivering a *Nature*-sponsored lecture at the annual Hay-on-Wye literary festival, Lander, whose laboratory is one of the main US sequencing centres, also called for an international moratorium on the germline modification of human beings. Although he noted that this should not necessarily be a permanent ban, he said that he "would hate to wake up one morning to find that someone had produced a genetically modified child".

Ethics invoked to revise euthanasia drug patent

Munich The European Patent Office (EPO) came under fire last week over a patent on a euthanasia drug for mammals, granted to Michigan State University, that included possible application on humans. Several German, European and US pressure groups opposing human euthanasia challenged the patent on ethical grounds, fearing that it could encourage human euthanasia.

The EPO's opposition board accepted the ethical objections, and has restricted the patent's validity to lower mammals. According to an EPO spokesman, this is the first time that a patent has been modified solely because of ethical concerns.

Budget setback for US science agencies

Washington Hopes for a major increase in funding for the US National Science Foundation (NSF) suffered a setback last week, as appropriations subcommittees in the House of Representatives passed their initial appropriations bills for key research agencies. Science advocates remain optimistic that each of these agencies will do better than the initial House offering when the budget process for the 2001 fiscal year is completed in the autumn.

The subcommittee with jurisdiction over the NSF offered it an increase of \$167 million, or 4 per cent, against the 17 per cent proposed by President Bill Clinton, and

granted NASA an increase of \$112 million, or less than 1 per cent, against 4 per cent proposed by Clinton. And although the \$1 billion increase passed by another House subcommittee for the National Institutes of Health surpassed Clinton's proposal, it fell short of the \$2.7 billion sought by biomedical research advocates and granted earlier by the Senate appropriations subcommittee.

TV programme pre-empts German research on bees

Munich German researchers at the University of Jena have been embarrassed by a premature television report describing their as yet unpublished research. According to the report, the work provides the first evidence of the horizontal transfer of a herbicide resistance transgene from plants to the gut bacteria of bees.

The day after the report was broadcast — without the scientists' approval — the university issued a press release about the four-year study, which monitored bees feeding on pollen from genetically engineering maize and rape. The researchers were quoted as emphasizing that the transgene was only detected in a small number of bees, and that these were not harmed by the transfer.

New commission to focus on US oceans

Washington The Pew Charitable Trusts has set up a high-powered commission led by Todd Whitman, the governor of New Jersey, and Leon Panetta, former White House chief-of-staff, to assess America's oceans and recommend actions to assist marine conservation.

Scientists on the Pew Oceans Commission will include Jane Lubchenco of Oregon State University and Charles Kennel, director of the Scripps Institution in California. The commission promises to conduct "an aggressive schedule" of public hearings and to produce interim reports within 18 months. It will draw on Pew's considerable resources to boost the public profile of marine conservation issues in the United States.

Correction

As a result of cuts made during editing, the News Feature on gene silencing (*Nature* 404, 804; 2000) failed to mention that post-transcriptional gene silencing in plants was co-discovered by Joseph Mol and his colleagues at the Free University of Amsterdam. Researchers led by Jan Kooter in Mol's lab were also the first to demonstrate the post-transcriptional nature of the phenomenon. Interested readers can find a full review of the history of gene silencing in plants in *Trends in Plant Science* (4, 340–347; 1999).