



Small in Japan: semiconductor research is on a roll.

Japan plans joint project on nanoscale semiconductors

Tokyo Japanese semiconductor companies have announced plans to join a government-led nanoelectronics research and development effort that aims to build semiconductor devices in the 50-nanometre range by 2007.

Under the initiative from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), engineers from large semiconductor companies will join forces with researchers from national laboratories and universities to develop process technologies for the semiconductors.

But overall funding for the project remains unclear, with the government's ambitious spending plan for information technology already meeting some public criticism. MITI officials say they have requested ¥6 billion (US\$54 million) in funding for the project next year, but admit that only a fraction of that amount may eventually be granted.

In parallel to the MITI initiative, the Japan Electronics and Information Technology Industries Association has announced a \$750 million joint project to develop production technologies for 0.1-micrometre processes and system-on-chip technologies — objectives that are almost within reach.

DNA archive in fight against Japanese whale meat sales

Tokyo The Japanese Fishery Agency has announced plans to clamp down on the sale of illegal whale meat by archiving the DNA of captured whales.

In Japan, only a few kinds of whale meat are allowed to be sold, including Minke

whales caught in a controversial research programme, and there is widespread doubt about the source of meat in shops.

The agency plan involves registering DNA from whale skin samples as soon as a whale is captured. Eventually, a database would allow the meat in supermarkets to be traced.

Regulating the distribution of whale meat is seen as a step towards overcoming international resistance to the resumption of commercial whaling.

Australians hunt for Tonga's disease genes

London An Australian biotechnology company has secured exclusive access to a possible genetic goldmine on the Pacific island of Tonga. In an agreement brokered by the International Diabetes Institute, Autogen has won the right to search for links to disease in the gene pool of the island's 108,000 residents.

Autogen's main interest is in finding links to diabetes and obesity, both of which are common on Tonga. The company hopes that the Polynesian island's long isolation, along with its good kinship records and preference for large families, will simplify the search for disease-related genes.

The firm has pledged to share the profits from any drugs or therapies that come out of the research with the people of Tonga.

US researcher banned for fabricating data

Washington The US government has banned Evan Dreyer, a University of Pennsylvania researcher, from receiving federal research funds for ten years because he fabricated data in a 1996 grant application while at Harvard Medical School.

The health department's Office of Research Integrity has investigated around 100 misconduct cases, but Dreyer — an associate professor of ophthalmology and director of the university's glaucoma programme — is only the second to receive such a severe punishment.

A spokeswoman for the University of Pennsylvania says the university was unaware of the allegations against Dreyer when he resigned from Harvard and moved there in 1997.

British public doubts genetics rules

London Nearly three-quarters of British people think that government regulation has not kept up with human genetics research, according to a survey released last Monday by the UK Human Genetics Commission.

Almost a third of those surveyed by MORI (Market & Opinion Research International) believe that "genetic research

is tampering with nature and is therefore unethical". But 90% of the respondents expect that human genetics research will result in cures for many diseases, and 70% believe that it will lead to healthier babies.

Support for taking DNA samples from suspects of violent crime was almost unanimous, but less than half of those interviewed were comfortable with applying this in cases of drink-driving or fraud. Only 8% thought genetic test results should be used for setting insurance premiums.

Redundancies looming at John Innes Centre

London Scientists at the John Innes Centre in Norwich could face redundancy next month, when its management reviews the centre's activities in an attempt to free up funding for research into new areas of science.

Just over half of the research centre's funding is currently allocated to specific projects. The remainder — a £10 million (US\$14 million) grant from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council — can be used to seed new scientific opportunities. But the centre, which focuses on plant and microbial research, has almost quadrupled in size over the past 10 years, and much of this grant is consumed by operational costs.

Chris Lamb, the centre's director, says he needs to free up £2 million in the next two years. Areas of science less likely to contribute to the centre's growth will be identified, and changes, including redundancies, will be made. The exercise is expected to be complete by mid-December with the loss of about 30 jobs.

European lab sees budget rising

Heidelberg The 16 member states that run the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) have approved a significant increase in the laboratory's budget.

Subject to a formal ratification by Denmark, the EMBL council has agreed to increase the lab's budget by 25% over the next five years — a boost of 11.5 million euros (US\$10 million).

The European Bioinformatics Institute, EMBL's outstation in Hinxton, near Cambridge, will get nearly half of the top-up. Its 6.1 million euro baseline budget will increase by 5 million euros. The institute has been underfunded, its supporters say, with the European Commission and European Union member states both avoiding responsibility (*Nature* 405, 723; 2000).

The council also agreed to allow EMBL to establish an endowment fund to support technology transfer and small start-up companies. The fund will be financed from independent private sources.