Celera completes genome sequences of three mouse strains

Washington Celera Genomics has announced that it has sequenced the genomes of three strains of mice. The company says that the assembled sequences each contain about 2.6 billion base pairs, compared with 2.9 billion base pairs in the human genome.

Celera, based in Rockville, Maryland, this year published a draft sequence of the human genome (see *Science* **291,** 1304–1351; 2001). It aims to capitalize on its latest investment by charging scientists to use the mouse genome and the tools needed to compare it with the human genome and those of other organisms.

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Shotgun sequence: Celera will ask researchers to pay for access to its three mouse genomes.

The mouse genome is of particular interest because mice are used as models for many human diseases. A publicly funded group currently sequencing the genome of another mouse strain hopes to have a draft by 2003.

Oxford and Princeton forge stronger links

London **The universities of Oxford and Princeton have announced plans to improve ties between the two institutions. The scheme will create new research partnerships, increase faculty and student exchanges, and give researchers at each institution access to facilities at the other.**

The programme will initially cover 12 collaborative projects, encompassing research in nanotechnology, astrophysics, materials science, biotechnology and genomics. The universities are "remarkably similar in goals and strengths", says Oxford vice-chancellor Colin Lucas. "This agreement will help make both institutions even stronger."

Foot-and-mouth spurs calls for safe soil

London Fears that carcasses of animals slaughtered during Britain's foot-and-mouth epidemic could be spreading pathogens to farmland and drinking water have led scientists to call for stronger protection of the soil.

"We need laws to ensure that disposal is as rapid as possible and always in the right location," says Ken Killham, president of the British Society for Soil Science. "Things must happen now, we mustn't let the continued unsustainable practices in planning and the disposal of carcasses ever happen again."

The society says that recent government proposals for a national soil strategy are "disappointing" because they do not include legislative protection for soil. It wants the soil to be given similar protection to that currently granted to air and water.

http://www.bsss.bangor.ac.uk

Vandals cut power to Arizona observatory

San Diego **The operators of Mount Graham International Observatory in Arizona have blamed extreme environmentalists for causing damage worth more than $100,000 to the construction of a new power line to the observatory.**

Some environmentalists object to the expansion of the telescope site, of which the new 37-kilometre underground power line is part. They claim that nearby populations of

red squirrels and spruce trees would be harmed if scientists were allowed to go ahead with proposed plans for new telescopes at the observatory. Work on the $10.5-million project was suspended for a day after vandals damaged vehicles and equipment.

Environmental groups had earlier failed in attempts to persuade the courts to block the observatory's expansion.

MMR vaccine cleared of link with autism

Washington There is no evidence for a link between the measles–mumps–rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, a study from the US Institute of Medicine reports.

A paper published in *The Lancet* in 1998 had described how 12 children had developed autistic spectrum disorders shortly after being given the MMR jab. That research has since been heavily criticized, and the new report is the latest in a series of epidemiological studies that have failed to confirm the link. But its authors point out that almost all US children receive the MMR jab, making it difficult to compare vaccinated and non-vaccinated populations.

Public-health officials have expressed concern that publicity surrounding the *Lancet* paper would dissuade parents from having their children vaccinated. The MMR vaccine has helped to virtually eliminate measles, mumps and rubella in the United States.

http://www.nap.edu/books/0309074479/html

Three scientists appointed to House of Lords

London Three scientists have been chosen to join the British House of Lords under a new scheme to appoint independent life peers.

Robert May, president of the Royal Society, Susan Greenfield, director of the Royal Institution, a London-based research and education organization, and Ilora Finlay, vice-dean of the University of Wales College of Medicine, will take their seats after this summer's general election. The election committee said the new peers were chosen for their "knowledge, authority and independence".

Twelve other appointments were made under the so-called people's peers scheme,

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Life peer: Susan Greenfield will take her seat in the House of Lords after the general election.

which has been criticized for not selecting ordinary members of the public. Appointment of the people's peers is the latest stage in the reform of the House of Lords following the expulsion of 600 hereditary peers last year. The government is yet to decide how the remaining positions will be filled.