



Protesters in Munich march alongside a 'Trojan Oncomouse'.

Europeans protest against patent for Harvard mouse

Munich and Basel. The extent and power of the growing lobby against the European patent granted to the Harvard Oncomouse, licensed to the US company DuPont, was evident last week in the run up to last Saturday's deadline for formal oppositions. Coordinated demonstrations took place in ten countries, the Swiss government was petitioned to exempt Switzerland from patent coverage and, following an emergency debate, the European parliament voted overwhelmingly for an immediate revoking of the patent and for a moratorium on further patenting for transgenic animals until a clear ruling has been established.

At least eight objections, called oppositions, to the mouse patent were filed by last Saturday's deadline, asking the European Patent Office (EPO) to revoke the Oncomouse patent. The patent, first filed in 1985, was granted nine months ago after a previous (successful) opposition was overturned.

Some 80 groups in Germany, representing at least two million people, banded together under the Munich-based umbrella organization *Kein Patent auf Leben* (No Patents on Life). A Swiss opposition was put forward by a similar group of 70 organizations. There is also opposition for the first time from one of Germany's 16 states, Hessen. British pressure groups filed an opposition

last month (see *Nature* 361, 103; 1993).

The number of oppositions is significant given the high cost — DM1,200 (US\$800) — of filing one. The money goes towards operating the EPO, which unlike national patent offices is not supported by taxes. The oppositions will be considered by the EPO over the next year.

Last Thursday the European parliament, acting on a proposal from the Green faction, called for the EPO to withdraw the Oncomouse patent on the grounds that it violates the 'morality clause' within the EPO's convention and conflicts with parliament's amendment to the proposed directive on biotechnology under consideration by the Council of Ministers of the European Communities, which outlaws patents on transgenic animals designed to suffer. The parliament also voted 178:19 for a moratorium on further patenting. Although the vote has no legislative authority without the support of the Council of Ministers, it is expected to bring pressure on the EPO to change its regulations.

A petition with 7,300 signatures has asked the Swiss government to exempt itself from offering patent protection for genetically altered plants and animals. Switzerland is one of 11 European countries in which the Oncomouse patent is valid.

Alison Abbott & Oliver Klaffke

US Interior secretary considers a national biological survey

Washington. US Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt is considering ways to consolidate biological research within his agency, using the US Geological Survey (USGS) as a model. At present, biological research activities are scattered across divisions that include the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, USGS and Bureau of Land Management.

Last week Babbitt met with staff from the existing divisions of the Department of Interior to learn what data on species and habitats already exist within his agency. A spokesman said that the Secretary "wants to get moving with [the plan] right now" in time to influence the department's budget for fiscal year 1994 to be presented in March.

Babbitt, a conservationist and former governor of Arizona, has talked about the need to focus federal research in plant and animal ecology and to strengthen the 20-year-old Endangered Species Act that comes up for reauthorization by Congress this year. In a television interview last week, Babbitt said that the conflict between loggers and environmentalists in the northwestern United States over the protected spotted owl is going to be the "test case" for the act.

A new biological survey could trigger a government-wide reorganization of environmental research, the goal of such groups as the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology and Government (see *Nature* 360, 699; 1992). The Clinton administration has not as yet addressed the issue, although last week it abolished the White House Council on Environmental Quality and replaced it with a new Office of Environmental Policy headed by 29-year-old Kathleen McGinty, a former Senate aide to Vice President Al Gore and a lawyer with an undergraduate degree in chemistry.

In the meantime, plans for a new US National Biodiversity Center at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington are on hold after George Bush failed in the final days of his presidency to sign an executive order approving the centre, as was expected (see *Nature* 361, 197; 1993). Although the order had won the approval of several government agencies, it never emerged from the White House Office of Management and Budget and onto Bush's desk.

As it is now conceived, the National Biodiversity Center would be either a large central repository of data on plant and animal species or a network linking existing databases. An administration spokeswoman said that no decision has been made but that "we're obviously interested in the concept and are discussing it".

Tony Reichhardt

London meeting on British science

On Friday 19 March, there will be a meeting at the Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1, to discuss proposals for the forthcoming White Paper on the organization of British science. The speakers will be Sir Eric Ash (Rector, Imperial College London), Professor Michael Brady (University of Oxford), Dr Dai Rees (Secretary, Medical Research Council) and Sir Mark Richmond (Chairman, Science and Engineering Research Council); the meeting will start at 9.30 a.m. and end at 4.00 p.m.

Admission to the meeting will be by ticket, free of charge, obtainable from Mary Sheehan, *Nature*, 4 Little Essex Street, London WC2R 3LF. Coffee and tea will be provided.

There will also be a sandwich lunch for those who want it, **at a cost of £5**: please send a cheque made out to *Nature* with your ticket application. Tickets for both the meeting and lunch will be sent out during the second week of March.