

France gives go-ahead for genomics centre on complex diseases

[PARIS] The French government is believed to have approved plans to create a national centre for the genotyping of complex diseases. The centre, which will have a budget of FF50–70 million (US\$8–12 million) annually, will be similar to the UK Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, which was created in 1994. Mark Lathrop, a leading genome researcher currently at the Wellcome centre, is being tipped to become director of the French centre.

The ministry for national education, research and technology declined to confirm that any decision has been taken, saying that it was “too soon” to discuss details. But, according to reliable sources, it decided last Friday (29 August) to finance the creation of a centre to study the genetics of diseases, such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease, that are caused by the interaction of multiple genes with each other and with environmental factors.

The proposal to build the centre, combined with the recent decision to build a French national sequencing centre (see *Nature* 387, 542; 1996), represents an effort by France to regain ground in genomics, having lost its early lead in the mapping of the human genome (see *Nature* 361, 671; 1993). The centre would “create a considerable dynamic” in the study of complex diseases in France, says Florent Soubrier, a researcher at the national biomedical research agency, INSERM, who prepared a report for the government on its proposal.

Japan ends funding for ‘cold’ fusion project

[TOKYO] Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry has decided not to renew a contract for a five-year project on cold fusion when it ends next March.

The ministry has spent around ¥30 billion (US\$25 million) on the cold fusion research at its New Hydrogen Energy laboratory, near Sapporo, since Stanley Pons of the University of Utah and Martin Fleischmann of Southampton University first claimed to have achieved fusion in hydrogen at room temperature in 1989. Along with IMRA, a foundation sponsored by Toyota, the ministry has been the main source of support for cold fusion research internationally.

A ministry official said that the project had succeeded in developing “superior calorimeter technologies for heat excess measurements”. But, even with the assistance of these calorimeters, Japanese researchers — like their colleagues overseas — failed to find heat generated by cold fusion. The

decision to end the work emerged from the ministry’s budget request for 1998, which was released last week (see page 4).

Chemists agree official element names

[LONDON] The International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry has agreed official names and symbols for nine transfermium elements — those whose atomic number is greater than 100 — resolving disputes about who gains eternal credit for their discovery.

The chosen names, which will be published in the December issue of the journal *Pure and Applied Chemistry* (69, 2471–2473; 1997), are: 101 mendelevium (Md); 102 nobelium (No); 103 lawrencium (Lr); 104 rutherfordium (Rf); 105 dubnium (Db); 106 seaborgium (Sg); 107 bohrium (Bh); 108 hassium (Hs) and 109 meitnerium (Mt).

The names, all of which are already in general use, were formally agreed over several years by a Commission on Nomenclature of Inorganic Chemistry, which had to resolve various disagreements.

France drops plans for public health agency

[PARIS] France has abandoned ambitious plans to create a single public health agency, modelled on the US Food and Drug Administration, that would have been given responsibility for the safety of drugs and foodstuffs, and the quality of air and water.

The proposal for such an agency was included in the election manifesto of the Socialist government elected last June, and the idea has been staunchly defended by junior health minister Bernard Kouchner. But the government has now decided to keep the existing medicines agency, which comes under the jurisdiction of the ministry of health, and to create a separate agency for food safety, jointly controlled by the ministries of health, agriculture and finance.

The decision has disappointed some observers, who wished to see food safety removed from the agriculture ministry altogether in the wake of the ‘mad cow’ crisis. But others argue that the decision nonetheless represents a major improvement in the control of food safety, which is currently the responsibility of a multitude of different ministerial committees.

Task force will inspect safety at nuclear plants

[TOKYO] Japan’s Science and Technology Agency (STA) will appoint a task force to inspect all nuclear facilities operated by the Power Reactor and Nuclear Fuel Corporation (PNC), after last week’s revelation of weak safety and management practices at a radioactive waste storage

facility at the PNC’s Tokai Village plant.

The task force will include independent experts, the STA pledged. The agency also announced plans to contract out analysis of soil and water samples from around the facility to an independent expert team.

The results of the inspection will feed into the deliberations of a working group at STA, headed by Atsuyuki Suzuki, a professor of nuclear engineering at Tokyo University, that is considering the details of the transition to a new corporate structure at the PNC, due to take place later this year.

New Zealand farmer spread rabbit virus

[LONDON] A New Zealand farmer last week admitted to spreading rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD) with the help of other farmers in an attempt to control the country’s rabbit population.

The farmer said that the idea of inoculating rabbits with the virus came from news reports of the spread of RCD among Australian rabbits after it had escaped a quarantined trial in October 1995.

At the end of last month, New Zealand police cordoned off parts of the North Island and South Island areas, set up road blocks and established ‘no-fly’ zones, after the agriculture ministry found dead rabbits at several farms. The rabbits had tested positive for the virus.

The New Zealand government had rejected the use of the virus to control rabbits in July. However, the farmers will not be prosecuted as the deliberate release of organisms is not illegal under New Zealand’s Biosecurity Act.

Remote-sensing NASA satellite loses contact

[WASHINGTON] Spacecraft managers at the US space agency NASA and TRW, Inc. were struggling this week to regain contact with a new satellite that has been out of radio contact since 26 August.

The \$71-million Lewis satellite, which is testing several advances in spacecraft design as well as the feasibility of hyperspectral imagery of Earth from space, was launched into a temporary checkout orbit on 22 August, but ground controllers stopped receiving signals from it four days later. Just before the signal was lost, telemetry indicated that the spacecraft had begun a slow spin, perhaps due to a stuck thruster.

Without its solar arrays pointing at the Sun, power onboard the satellite began to drain away. Mission managers hoped power would return, however, as the Sun’s angle improved early this week. Lewis can stay in its current orbit for about three weeks before atmospheric drag brings it down to burn up in the atmosphere.