

Republicans accused of 'risky experiment' in cutting budget

Washington. Republicans in the US Congress were last week accused by a senior official of the National Science Foundation (NSF) of carrying out "a very risky experiment" by curbing science and technology funding in an attempt to eliminate the budget deficit by the year 2002.

"The science and technology budgets, and the education related to [both], are extremely important to the nation," said Anne Petersen, who is both the deputy director of the \$3.2-billion agency and its chief operating officer. At a time when scientific opportunity has "never been greater", Republican plans to eliminate the \$144-billion deficit will "severely impair" the government's ability to make good on the promise of science, Petersen said in Washington.

On the day she was speaking, the US House of Representatives split almost entirely along party lines when it voted by 226 to 195 to pass a budget resolution for 1997 based on a gradual reduction in spending on various civilian science agencies — including for example, the NSF and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration — from \$16.5 billion in 1997 to \$15.6 billion in 2002. □

Chernobyl academics in jail

London. Two academics from Belarus, jailed in Minsk for organizing a rally to commemorate the tenth anniversary last month of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, have been on hunger strike for nearly a month. Yuri Khadyka, a 56-year-old physicist with the Belarus Institute of Physics, and Viachaslaw Siwchyk, a 33-year-old geologist, were arrested on 26 April. They are described as in "critically poor health, severely weakened and disoriented" after almost three weeks without food. Relatives are not allowed to bring them medication.

Approximately 400 Belarus academics have added their names to a petition calling for the immediate release of Khadyka and Siwchyk. As many as 50,000 people are believed to have taken part in the rally, which was organized with the permission of the Minsk authorities. The police were later ordered to break up the demonstration and more than 200 people were arrested. □

EU cuts radiation dose limits

London. The Council of Ministers of the European Union (EU) has ordered an 80 per cent reduction in the maximum quantity of ionizing radiation to which a member of the public can be exposed. Under a revised directive issued earlier this month, a member of the public in an EU member state can be exposed to a maximum of 1 millisievert (mSv) each year, compared to the present limit of 5mSv.

The directive also revises exposure limits for radiation industry personnel to 100 mSv in a consecutive five-year period, an average limit of 20mSv per year. This amounts to 40 per cent of the current 50mSv yearly limit. EU member states have been given four years to implement the new directive through domestic legislation. □

Funding for 'proteome' project

Sydney. The pharmaceutical company Glaxo Wellcome is due to finalize a A\$1.9-million (US\$1.46-million) contract today (23 May) to fund 'proteome' research at the University of Sydney in New South Wales, Australia. A proteome is the total amount of protein in any living cell that is encoded by each cell's DNA. Proteome research is coming to be recognized as the 'flipside' of the Human Genome Project.

The funding will allow Ian Humphery-Smith, a microbiologist at the university, to look at the feasibility of establishing a large-scale facility for proteome analysis. The work will be carried out at Humphery-Smith's new laboratory in the National Innovation



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Centre at the Australian Technology Park in Sydney, and is hoped to lead to the discovery of new genetic material for use in the prevention and early diagnosis of cancer and infectious diseases. □

Prominent professors lured back

London. Britain's Royal Society has attracted back two prominent scientists who had left to carry out research in the United States. The two are among five new research professorships announced last week, the holders of which will each receive 40 per cent more than a basic professorial salary, as well as generous research grants.

Brian Charlesworth, currently a professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Chicago, will join the Institute of Cell, Animal and Population Biology at the University of Edinburgh next year, having spent 12 years in the United States. Richard Borchers, currently professor of mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, will take up a Royal Society Research Professorship in mathematics at the University of Cambridge in June 1996. □

Japan warned over basic research

Tokyo. Japan must increase its capabilities in basic research, according to a white paper (policy document) released last week by the Science and Technology Agency (STA) in Tokyo. But despite its title, *Striving to Become a Front-runner in Research Activity*, the paper has received a lukewarm response from Japanese researchers, who are sceptical that it will result in concrete reforms.

The paper draws attention to Japan's relatively unimpressive record in basic research, and says that this can be improved only if institutional obstacles are eliminated. Its recommendations include increased technical assistance to public-sector laboratories, and more flexibility in the hiring of personnel. It also proposes expanded information technology resources, changes in intellectual property rules, and greater international exchange of researchers. □

UK technology 'needs momentum'

London. Britain's opposition Labour Party has promised to make the Technology Foresight Programme, introduced by the Conservative government in its white paper of May 1993, a central element to its 'delivery mechanism' for science and technology, the shadow minister for science and technology, Adam Ingram, said last week.

Although the programme has come under criticism from some academics for its attempts to link research to social and economic aims, Ingram said the main problem it faces is a loss of momentum. "My first task as a science minister would be to establish why that momentum has stalled, and to examine ways to ensure that there is a proper coordinated, interdepartmental and cross-panel approach," Ingram told the Institute of Electrical Engineers. □

Snail may delay road construction

London. A tiny mollusc may halt — or at least delay — the construction of a controversial bypass in the south of England. Government scientists have recommended that a new European nature reserve be established along the route of the Newbury bypass, the focus in recent months of intense conflict with environmental protesters, to save the habitat of the rare Desmoulin's whorl snail (above). If the proposal is accepted by English Nature's ruling council, the government will face new legal challenges in proceeding with the construction of the bypass, which is due to start in less than four months. □



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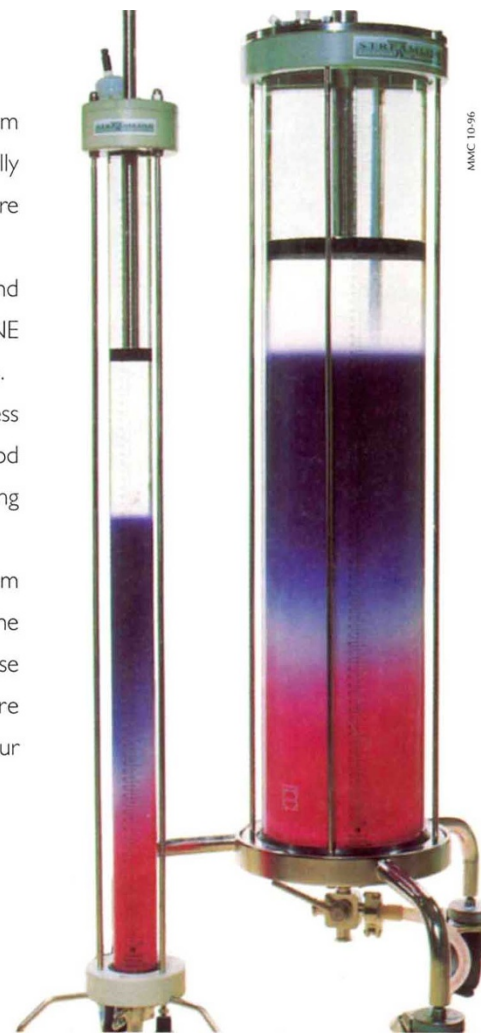
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