German physicists oppose cuts to international research labs

Munich. The German Physical Society is to lobby the German government over its proposed cuts to international research laboratories such as the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) and the European Southern Observatory (ESO) (see *Nature* **382**, 285; 1996). The society's president, Detlev Schmitz, a particle physicist from the University of Aachen, says that it plans to prepare a document for the research ministry in September that is likely to defend both CERN and ESO.

The budget reductions will have both national and international implications. Schmitz says that cuts at CERN and ESO will have an immediate effect on physics research projects carried out in German universities. Riccardo Giaconni, director of ESO, says that if the cuts are approved, they could delay ESO's Very Large Telescope beyond its current completion date of 2000, and thus force up its costs. □

Nuclear plant voted out

Tokyo. In Japan's first local referendum on nuclear power, the residents of a small town on the coast of the Japan Sea have voted against the construction of a nuclear plant in their town, setting a precedent that is likely to increase the difficulties of the national government in pursuing its plans to expand nuclear power.

There was a large turnout — over 88 per cent — for the plebiscite in Maki in Niigata Prefecture, a town with fewer than 24,000 eligible voters. Nearly 12,500 voted against the nuclear plant. After the vote, Takaaki Sasaguchi, the mayor of Maki, who proposed the plebiscite in his election campaign in January, repeated his pledge to bar the sale of land on which Tohoku Electric Power Company has for years been proposing to build the nuclear plant. □

Radiological limit 'misguided'

London. Britain's National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) has described as "misguided" and "fraught with danger" attempts to propose a minimum threshold for radiation. In its annual report, published last week, Roger Clarke, director of NRPB, reiterated the board's opinion that there is no such thing as a radiation dose that carries zero risk.

"The pursuit of a threshold is an attempt at a quick fix for problems that require a more deliberate approach," writes Clarke. "The real issue to be decided is the acceptability of risk — where does society set levels of unacceptability or triviality of risk". He suggested it would be more appropriate to assume a progressive increase in risk with increasing dose. □

Impasse on N-waste storage

Washington. The US Senate last week voted 63–37 in favour of a bill that would allow spent nuclear fuel to be stored at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, on an interim basis, until a decision is reached to build a permanent underground repository there. But President Bill Clinton has said that he will veto the bill, and with no sign that supporters can muster the 67 senators needed to override a veto, the spent fuel will be staying just where it is — in temporary storage at 80 nuclear power stations around the country. □

'Protect Internet' for UK scientists

London. The House of Lords has called for moves to protect Internet bandwidth for British academic researchers, possibly by creating a US-style high-speed computer network dedicated to research (see *Nature* **380**, 93; 1996). The recommendation is contained in a report on UK information technology policy, published by the Lords' select committee on science and technology.