

## US space programme 'should not centre on Mars life claims'

**Washington.** The US space programme should resist the temptation to overhaul completely its plans for Mars exploration to base them solely on last summer's announced finding of signs of life in a martian meteorite, a panel of the National Research Council (NRC) said last week.

The NRC's Committee on Lunar and Planetary Exploration (Complex) confirmed its support for a Mars sample return mission, but only as part of a "measured approach to the exploration of Mars" aimed at "advancing our understanding of Mars on all fronts".

"Complex believes that it is inappropriate to predicate an important aspect of future Martian studies on the unconfirmed results in a single scientific paper," wrote the panel, which had been asked by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to review sample return plans in the light of recent claims about life on Mars.

A programme focused only on hunting for microfossils would be inadvisable, says the report, "because unequivocal evidence may be hard to find". Instead, NASA should stay with the current strategy for Mars exploration proposed by earlier internal and external advisory groups, which begins with a global reconnaissance of the planet and includes geological and meteorological studies as well as the search for life.

The Complex panel warns that a strategy tailored only to searching for life could harm the scientific study of Mars, because "highly successful missions could be characterized as failures if they do not return with microfossils or living organisms".

The panel, chaired by Ronald Greeley of Arizona State University, prefers NASA to focus on the more comprehensive goal of "understanding Mars as a possible abode of life". Before science can settle the question of whether life exists on the planet, it must first understand how life evolved on Earth, and how planets themselves evolve. Scientists must also develop criteria for "the unambiguous identification of biotic signatures", which will require specialized equipment and laboratories, the report says.

Although the committee does not comment on specific mission scenarios for a Mars sample return, it does say that the most "aggressive" option under consideration "seems unrealistically ambitious". This requires a national commitment to Mars exploration and would land a 'robotic field geologist' on Mars as early as 2002.

This option will be scrutinized at a budget 'summit' meeting now scheduled for February at which White House and congressional leaders will try to agree on future funding levels for space. **Tony Reichhardt**

## Europe agrees a compromise

**Paris.** Consumer organizations and the food industry — but not environmentalist groups — have given a general welcome to a compromise deal in Europe on the marketing and labelling of novel foods, including genetically modified foods and ingredients. These will have to be labelled if there has been any change in their "characteristic or food property".

The agreement has been reached after five years of negotiations by a joint committee of the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, which represents the 15 member states. The agreed text is for a 'regulation'. If approved within six weeks by both bodies, as required under European rules, its provisions will pass directly into national law.

The most significant concession won by the parliament concerns the conditions under which food is labelled. The Council of Ministers and the European Commission had wanted labelling to be required only

although the agreement falls short of what consumer organizations had wanted, it is pleased the council and commission had made significant concessions on labelling.

But not everyone is satisfied with the compromise wording. Hiltrud Breyer, a member of the parliament's Green group, describes it as a "second-best solution" and an "unsatisfactory mixture of progress and loopholes". The Green group, and other environmental organizations, argue that one loophole is that foods or ingredients identical to traditional products would not have to be labelled. It would mean, for example, that oil pressed from modified soya beans would escape the requirement for labelling, as the oil cannot be distinguished from that produced from non-modified beans.

Roth-Behrendt, who is also a lawyer, challenges the realism of such claims. She argues that labelling would be impossible to implement in practice where modified products could not be distinguished from the traditional product. "What sort of legislation would it be if it couldn't be implemented?"

In fact, she argues, the oil example demonstrates precisely the strength of the proposed regulation. She points out that, if techniques were developed that allowed oil from modified soya beans to be distinguished from that prepared from non-modified beans, it would then have to be labelled.

Another controversial aspect of the agreement is that it does not call for mixtures of genetically modified and non-modified products to be segregated and labelled. This means that mixed shipments could be imported provided they were labelled as 'possibly' containing genetically modified

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## EU urges national

**Paris.** The European Commission admitted last week that genetically engineered maize has been illegally imported into the European Union (EU) since the beginning of October. One official from the commission claims that it is powerless to bring an immediate end to the imports, arguing that responsibility lies with member states.

The commission is scheduled to decide next week whether to approve Ciba's maize for import to the EU after it receives the conclusions of its three scientific committees — on foods, animal nutrition, and pesticides — as to its safety. Until the commission reaches a decision, the unprocessed maize is "automatically banned" within the EU, notes a commission official.

But in a memo sent to member governments on 27 November, the commission reveals that, according to import certificates, 4,000 to 5,000 tonnes of maize have been arriving weekly through the ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam, Lisbon and Barcelona

**Chef protest: leading chefs at a Greenpeace photocall backed labelling for novel foods.**

where novel foods or ingredients were "significantly different" from an equivalent existing food or ingredient.

The new wording makes the text "water-tight", claims Dagmar Roth-Behrendt (Social Democrat, Germany), the parliament's rapporteur for the committee, who argues that the term "significantly different" was ambiguous. The agreed text means that labelling will be required for all products where any difference to the traditional product can be proven scientifically, she says.

The compromise has been welcomed by both the European Consumers' Association (BEUC) and the Confederation of EU Food and Drink Industries. BEUC says that,