

Nuclear waste body cancels contracts after plans rejected

[LONDON] Nirex, the company charged with disposing of waste from Britain's nuclear power stations, has cancelled contracts for an underground 'laboratory' to investigate the feasibility of storing waste beneath Longlands Farm in Sellafield, Cumbria.

The news follows last week's decision by the government to dismiss Nirex's application to build the laboratory, partly because of scientific uncertainty about the characteristics of the proposed site. Contract staff working on the laboratory have been asked "to return to their parent companies". Nirex's chief executive, Michael Folger, says the government's decision may also have implications for the company's own staff.

MAFF under fire on cloning funds

[LONDON] An all-party group of British politicians has urged the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) to reconsider a decision, which it describes as "cavalier and blinkered", to withdraw funding for the research that led to the first successful cloning of an adult sheep at the Roslin Institute in Scotland.

The House of Common select committee on science and technology has also suggested that British legislation should be altered to close a loophole in a law passed in 1990 that had been intended to ban all cloning of human beings, but whose language left ambiguous whether it applied to the techniques developed at Roslin (see *Nature* 386, 98; 1997).

Company heads plead guilty on AIDS charged

[TOKYO] In a surprise move, three former presidents of Midori Juji (Green Cross Corporation), Japan's leading blood product manufacturer, pleaded guilty on Monday (24 March) to charges of professional negligence resulting in the death of a liver patient from AIDS, the first admission of guilt in the recently opened criminal trials in Japan's HIV blood scandal.

The three former presidents were expected to plead innocent, but apparently concluded that the prosecutor's case was too strong. The admissions of guilt are expected to strengthen the hand of prosecutors in other criminal cases filed against Takeshi Abe, the head of the government's AIDS study group in 1983, and Akihito Matsumura, a former government official. Both claimed innocence at their first court hearings two weeks ago.

Cassini mission faces new safety questions

[WASHINGTON] NASA plans to update its Environmental Impact Statement for the Cassini mission to Saturn, reopening to public scrutiny questions about the safety of onboard plutonium batteries. A 1995 impact statement showed that the batteries — used to provide power at great distances from the Sun — pose a negligible risk in the event of a launch accident or spacecraft re-entry. But new information has since come to light, according to Mark Dahl of the agency's space science office. Dahl will not say what the new information is, but says "the [overall] bottom-line risk is about the same". A draft of the 'supplemental' impact statement will be available for public comment in April. Anti-nuclear groups plan to protest against the Cassini launch, set for October.

Engineer to head Italian agency

[MUNICH] Lucio Bianco, a 55-year-old engineer, has been nominated as the next president of the CNR, Italy's major basic research organization. He takes over from Enrico Garaci next month, once his appointment has been approved by parliament, which is a formality. He will preside over major changes intended to



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"Not being a protein chemist, I just want to clone the gene, express it, isolate the protein and move on," says Malcolm Zellars, who's working on his post-doc at Tufts University Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.