

Ecologists urged to 'win climate debate'

[ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO] Bruce Babbitt, the US Interior Secretary, last week urged 3,000 scientists gathered for the annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America to fulfil their "civic obligation" by helping to convince the American public of the case for man-made global warming.

"We have a scientific consensus but we don't have a public consensus" that man-made global warming is taking place, Babbitt said. "We can't get the message through by speeches from people like me. It is all of you that have that obligation."

Babbitt acknowledged scientists' tradition of caution when entering political debates. "But there are times that cry out for scientists' involvement, because the public doesn't have anywhere else to turn."

During the past month, the administration of President Bill Clinton has embarked on an effort to win over an uninterested American public and a sceptical Congress to the idea that the United States should agree to binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions at December's meeting of nations in Kyoto, Japan (see *Nature* 388, 407; 1997).

Despite the fact that the administration has still failed to specify targets for emissions, as it was required to do in June under the international agreement known as the Berlin mandate (see *Nature* 374, 584; 1995), Babbitt called for ecologists' support in this belated charm offensive.



Babbitt: 'civic obligation' on scientists to convince the US public over man-made global warming.

But Babbitt pleaded for ecologists' forbearance on two other issues — forest management and the Endangered Species Act — on which the administration has taken compromise positions that anger some conservationists. He said that some forests need thinning to prevent fire. And he asked the audience to support the process under way in the Senate to reauthorize the act in a way that may insure property developers against future liability (see *Nature* 388, 506; 1997).

Babbitt declined to comment afterwards on reports that the United States and Japan are pushing Europe to withdraw its ambitious proposal for a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions of 15 per cent from 1990 levels by the year 2010. He also denied that the

administration was moving too late to shift public opinion. "The important thing is what happens from here forward," he said.

Jerry Melillo, associate director for the environment at the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) at the White House, backed Babbitt's plea. He called on ecologists to rebut a recent guest editorial in the *Washington Post* by Robert Eaton, the chairman of Chrysler, which played down the importance of car exhausts in climate change by arguing that 97 per cent of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere comes from plants, and less than 0.5 per cent from vehicle exhausts. While true, the statement is not relevant to the question of what has caused the recent sharp increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

Melillo said: "It is our responsibility as scientists to make sure that this kind of problem is straightened out."

OSTP is arranging workshops around the United States at which scientists, politicians and others will assess the impact of climate change and possible responses to it.

But Steven Sanderson, a political scientist and vice-president of Emory University in Georgia, expressed doubts about Babbitt's call for help. "There's an invitation here to turn science into politics, and I think there's a problem with that. The contribution scientists have to make is to do good science, not to become policy wonks." **Colin Macilwain**

Miami AIDS researcher denies charges over billing irregularities

[SAN DIEGO] A prominent AIDS researcher in Florida is facing trial in federal court in Miami over a billing scheme that started in 1989 in which he is alleged to have obtained illegally more than \$570,000 from two institutions.

Lionel Resnick, 42, who formerly ran the laboratory in the Pearlman Research Center of Mount Sinai Hospital in Miami Beach, was indicted last August in the US District Court in Miami on 52 counts of mail fraud and money laundering. He is alleged to have set up a mock laboratory company operating from his home to bill the University of Miami and the All Children's Hospital in St Petersburg, Florida, for tests related to AIDS research and clinical care.

In 1994, Resnick took a high-profile and controversial stand on whether a Florida dentist with AIDS had infected some of his patients with HIV. On the CBS programme *60 Minutes*, he challenged the view of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the dentist had infected the patients.

Resnick has pleaded not guilty to the charges against him and has placed about \$500,000 in an escrow account to pay back

the two institutions. His attorneys have described the federal indictment as an excessive action, and say that it grew from an administrative misunderstanding. The beginning of the criminal trial has been repeatedly delayed as Resnick contested legal points. An appeal to a higher court has delayed the trial until later this year.

The discovery of billing irregularities caused considerable concern at the University of Miami, where Resnick was a key collaborator on national AIDS trials, and led to a review of research projects in which he was involved. A dermatologist by training, Resnick carried out tests for AIDS research by Margaret A. Fischl, an internal medicine specialist at the university.

University officials say they found no problems with the scientific findings. The National Institutes of Health's Office of Research Integrity is monitoring the Resnick affair; officials there declined to comment. Resnick has left Mount Sinai, but continues to treat patients with AIDS-related lesions.

According to the federal indictment, the Mount Sinai laboratory headed by Resnick was set up with a \$1-million grant from the

state of Florida to carry out sophisticated tests for AIDS research. In July 1989, Resnick founded Vironc Inc., a private company with neither employees nor equipment. By October 1989, says the indictment, he was submitting invoices "to the University of Miami for payment to Vironc rather than Mount Sinai".

It continues: "In truth and in fact, the AIDS-related testing requested by the University of Miami continued to be performed at the Mount Sinai lab by Mount Sinai personnel using Mount Sinai equipment." By February 1990, Resnick is alleged to have done the same thing for tests from the All Children's Hospital.

Federal investigators have also been looking into billing practices at a health spa that Resnick owns in Miami Beach. Court documents say agents raided the Imagen Medical Day Spa in May 1996, seizing records after allegations that the federal Medicare health insurance programme for the elderly may have been improperly billed \$1.1 million for cosmetic treatments. No charges have been filed in this case, say federal officials. **Rex Dalton**