

Russian researchers hail move to bring salaries up to scratch

Moscow More than 50,000 Russian scientists are set to receive a remarkable New Year's bonus this week — an inflation-busting pay rise of up to 500%.

In a determined bid to halt the brain drain of researchers, the Russian Academy of Sciences has announced unprecedented and immediate salary increases for its employees. The move follows a public commitment from the government in November last year to boost support for science.

The 1,250 full and corresponding members of the academy — the elite of Russian researchers — will now receive monthly salaries of 20,000 and 10,000 roubles (US\$630 and \$315), respectively, five times more than they earned before. The salaries of postdocs and assistant professors will rise threefold, to 900 and 1,500 roubles, respectively.

Technicians, laboratory workers and young scientists will also get substantially more money later this year, says Boris Myasoedov, the academy's deputy secretary general for science. "We are very, very happy about this pleasant development," he says.



The Russian Academy of Sciences is offering large salary hikes to combat the country's brain drain.

Stargazers win heated battle over Native American site

Washington Astronomers have finally triumphed in a three-year battle to win approval for the VERITAS observatory on Mount Hopkins in Arizona.

Officials from the Coronado National Forest granted permission on 16 January for the construction of VERITAS (the Very Energetic Radiation Imaging Telescope Array System). The telescope array is designed to study high-energy radiation sources, such as active galactic nuclei and the remnants of supernovae. The site was controversial because it is close to a Native American 'sweat lodge' — a spiritual sauna in which occupants meditate around very hot stones.

Announcing the decision, forest supervisor John McGee said that the impact on the Native American site had been considered, but that "the scientific potential

of the VERITAS justifies these trade-offs".

As a compromise, the access road for the telescope will be located farther from the sweat lodge than originally planned. Pending any new challenges during a 45-day appeal period, and funding from the National Science Foundation, the \$25-million observatory could begin operations in 2005.

Antinori makes a meal of hunger-strike claim

Rome Having seen the Raelian sect draw so much interest over human cloning in recent weeks, fertility doctor Severino Antinori has hit on an unusual method of winning back the spotlight.

In a dramatic statement issued outside Italian government offices on 21 January, Antinori claimed that he was beginning a hunger strike "to the death". The fast is in protest against what he describes as persecution by Italian authorities, who have been attempting to determine whether his Rome-based clinic has carried out banned human-cloning work. Antinori has previously claimed that one of his patients was set to give birth to a cloned baby early this year.

Antinori is now demanding a personal guarantee of Italy's constitutional freedom of research from prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. But one week into his protest, Antinori has not been seen and is declining to comment on either his heroic gesture or his resulting physical health.

British science courses face high fees and low interest

London Science degree courses in England and Wales could become significantly more expensive than other subjects under government proposals for higher education, critics have charged.

A white paper on the future of higher education, published on 22 January, includes plans to allow universities to set their own fees of up to £3,000 (US\$5,000) per year for individual courses. Students currently pay just over £1,000 a year for all subjects.

Science courses cost universities more to provide, and some fear that this could lead to higher price tags — with a resulting slump in interest.

There was some good news for research, however. Annual funding for university teaching and research will rise from the current £5.7 billion to £6.9 billion by 2006. And the government has found an ingenious way to increase research quality at little cost: a new top grade in the Research Assessment Exercise means that the current ratings will be extended to include a 6* grade beyond the existing 5* and the less impressive 1 to 5.

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Lab investigators make return after sacking

Washington The University of California has re-hired two independent investigators who were fired last November from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

The investigators, Steven Doran and Glenn Walp, were dismissed after publicly releasing documents that they claimed showed numerous management failures at the nuclear weapons laboratory, which is operated by the university. Their sacking led to investigations by Congress and the Department of Energy, as well as the resignation of the lab's director and deputy director (see *Nature* 421, 99; 2003).

After a four-hour meeting between the two investigators and Richard Atkinson, the university's president, which both sides described as "candid and constructive", the pair have been re-hired in time for a separate investigation into the university's management of the laboratory.

Cash could dry up for desert ecological experiment

San Francisco Columbia University is reconsidering its funding of Biosphere 2, raising serious doubts over the future of the environmental research centre in the Arizona Desert.

Representatives at the centre say that the university wants to reduce its \$20-million commitment to fund the elaborate ecology experiment until 2010, and may pull the plug altogether. University officials say that they are considering several proposals, but favour forming a consortium with other universities to share the cost. Columbia's plans to hire new researchers at the facility have been dropped, and the masters programme in environmental public policy that it ran there is moving to the university's main campus in New York.

Biosphere 2 has struggled to win scientific credibility since it was opened by Texan billionaire Ed Bass in 1991. Columbia University took over its management in 1996, and has spent \$24 million trying to breathe new life into it (see *Nature* 402, 567; 1999).



End of the road? Prospects are bleak for Biosphere 2 if Columbia University withdraws its funding.