

Spending spree gives German physics a high-energy boost

Munich A free-electron X-ray laser and a heavy-ion and antiproton accelerator are among four projects given the green light last week by the German government.

Announcing the €1.6-billion (US\$1.7-billion) funding package on 5 February, the education and research minister Edelgard Bulmahn also pledged money for a new €100-million research aircraft for Earth and atmospheric research. The spending spree includes €25 million for a laboratory near Dresden that will use powerful magnetic fields for materials science and studies of condensed matter.

The €673-million free-electron X-ray laser will be situated at the German Electron Synchrotron in Hamburg. Free-electron lasers use electromagnetic radiation from particle accelerators to generate intense X-ray radiation with ultrashort wavelengths. Chemists, structural biologists, materials scientists and plasma physicists use them to study molecules during chemical reactions.

The facility, which will be jointly financed by several European countries, is scheduled to become operational in 2011. The antiproton accelerator, which will generate high-intensity ion beams and comes with a price tag of €675 million, will be built at the Heavy Ion Research Centre in Darmstadt.

Neuroscientists cruise for research-centre funding

San Diego Caribbean cruises are a rare treat for researchers, so an invitation from billionaire and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen for a dozen neuroscientists to spend time aboard a yacht set tongues wagging.

Nature has learned that the cruise, held last spring, was one of a series of secret meetings between leading neuroscientists and Allen, who is planning to fund a new research institute. Boat trips apart, the plans are being kept under close guard. Officials at the Paul G. Allen Foundations in Seattle, Washington, declined to discuss the issue, and scientists consulted on the project have signed confidentiality agreements.

The institute is expected to be set up in the Seattle area. One of its first projects is likely to be a molecular map of the mammalian brain, to show gene-expression patterns in the mouse nervous system.

Indian cricketers team up to hit polio for six

New Delhi Public-health officials in India are hoping to use the current Cricket World Cup to defeat childhood polio in the country. The largest ever mass immunization against the



Signing up: Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly puts his name to a campaign to beat polio.

disease began on 9 February — the first day of the tournament in southern Africa. By the time the Indian team returns home, the officials hope to have protected all of the country's 165 million children under 5 years of age.

"We need a massive social mobilization effort," says Savita Varde-Naqvi, a spokesperson for children's charity UNICEF in New Delhi. "And if cricket captain Sourav Ganguly tells kids to get vaccinated against polio, they will." The team has recently promoted polio vaccinations through adverts, competitions and events.

The move marks the start of a large-scale attempt to bring the virus, which causes paralysis and death in children, back under control. The global campaign to eradicate polio reduced the number of new cases worldwide in 2001 to just 483, but last year there were 1,556, with 85% of them in India.

NIH aims to characterize embryonic stem-cell lines

Washington Tired of comparing apples with oranges? Researchers working on human embryonic stem cells are — the cell types available to them are poorly defined, behave differently to each other in the lab, and make results difficult to compare. To address the problem, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has set up a unit to characterize the stem-cell lines that are currently available to federally funded scientists.

The project, to be run by Ron McKay of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Maryland, aims to compare the different cells' surface molecules and the cell lines' patterns of gene expression. The project could grow to answer bigger questions, such as whether the cell lines can generate every type of cell in the body. The NIH will post its results on the Internet.

"A uniform evaluation of all available lines by a single lab would be enormously valuable," says George Daley of the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Rare book collection faces final chapter

Caracas An unrivalled Latin American collection of books and journals is facing ruin as a result of Venezuela's political crisis.

The Marcel Roche Library at the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC) in Caracas has had its promised US\$3.2 million of funding withdrawn by the government, library officials say. The money was earmarked for purchasing new journals and maintaining the current collection.

IVIC officials have issued an international appeal for funds or assistance. The collection includes many complete series of journals, including *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* from its first issue in 1665. In 1996 it was named regional library for Latin America and the Caribbean by UNESCO.

University grilled over bacon chops' transgenic link

San Francisco This little piggy went to market, and the scientists who created its transgenic parents are facing some awkward questions. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has launched a probe into whether genetically engineered pigs from research labs have crept into the food supply.

It emerged last week that nearly 400 piglets descended from genetically modified animals at the University of Illinois have been sold to a local livestock trader since 2001, and many could have subsequently appeared in bacon sandwiches. The FDA wants to know whether any were carrying transgenes present in the adult pigs. One is a bovine gene that stimulates lactation, the second is a synthetic gene for insulin-like growth factor, intended to improve digestion.

The university says that the transgenes were not passed on to the piglets, but FDA officials have not confirmed this. Even if the piglets were unaffected, the university could still be fined for selling them without permission.



Pig issue: offspring from genetically modified pigs may have entered the food chain.