

Genetic-engineering projects falling by the wayside in Europe

Munich A litany of cancelled projects has been revealed by a European Commission survey of research into genetically modified plants and animals.

The survey, which will be published later this month, includes data from 168 public and private research units in 17 European countries. Some 39% of respondents reported cancelling projects on transgenic organisms in the past four years. The number of cancellations was higher in the private sector (61%) than among public research institutes and universities (23%). Over the same period, notifications for field trials of genetically modified plants dropped by around two-thirds.

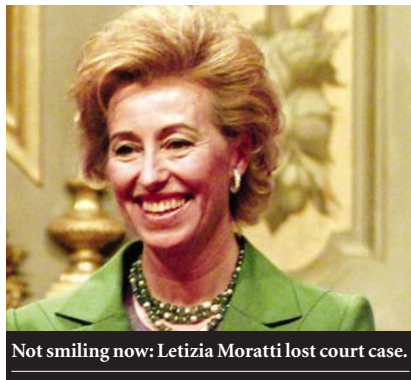
Respondents who cancelled projects cited consumer scepticism, unclear legislation and an uncertain market. The survey's organizer, Klaus Menrad of the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research in Karlsruhe, Germany, says that such problems are forcing smaller European agribusinesses to look at alternative ways to produce new seeds, such as conventional plant breeding.

Italian science minister loses out over research reform

Rome Italian scientists had cause for relief last week, after a court rescued them from the threat of unwelcome reform.

A regional court in Rome ruled that research minister Letizia Moratti had acted beyond her power in publishing a decree in January that placed the CNR, Italy's main basic-research organization, in the hands of a commissioner (see *Nature* 421, 465; 2003). Moratti had said the decree was justified as senior CNR staff were unsympathetic to her plans to restructure the organization.

The case was brought by CNR president Lucio Bianco, whose position was to have been replaced by the commissioner, named as Adriano De Maio, rector of the private Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome. The court stated that the restructuring had not been



Not smiling now: Letizia Moratti lost court case.

made law and that the minister could not prejudice Bianco's willingness to implement it if required to do so — even though Bianco has publicly criticized the plans.

Laser quest foiled as officials sent packing

San Francisco The latest stage in a four-year spat over a \$20-million laser has ended with government officials being refused entry to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

The officials were rebuffed on 27 February when they turned up to inspect the Mark III free-electron laser, which has been at Duke since 1986 and is being used to develop eye- and brain-surgery techniques. Its inventor, John Madey, moved to the University of Hawaii in 1997 and wants the device back. Hawaii officials intend to use it to develop nuclear- and chemical-weapons detectors and have already renovated space to house it.

The Department of Energy (DOE), which funded much of Madey's early work on the laser, has agreed to help get it. Last month the DOE wrote to Duke saying it was coming to inspect the 20-metre instrument as a preamble to removing it. But Duke assistant counsel Kate Hendricks told them that they would not be given access. The DOE says it will now review documents that Duke says support its claim of ownership.

Victims of smallpox vaccine 'should be compensated'

Washington The US government's smallpox-vaccination programme received a boost last week, as health secretary Tommy Thompson announced a compensation plan for any medic who is harmed by the vaccine.

President George W. Bush decided in December to vaccinate healthcare workers against smallpox, as they could be exposed to infected people if the virus were used in a terrorist attack. But hospital employees boycotted the scheme, saying the vaccine was unsafe and liability issues were unresolved. After six weeks, only 12,400 of the 500,000 intended recipients had been vaccinated.

Thompson's solution, which is yet to be approved by Congress, includes payments of two-thirds of lost wages, up to a maximum of \$50,000, and \$260,000 for family members in the event of the vaccine causing death.

US Army plans assault on biotech frontline

San Diego The US Army wants to tap the biotechnology research power of the country's universities to improve the fighting capabilities of future soldiers.

The army has invited groups of three universities to form partnerships with industry to create an Institute for Collaborative Biotechnologies, which would



The US army hopes for a boost from biotech.

receive \$37 million over five years for basic research. Sensors for biological and chemical weapons and new medical devices are just some of the hoped-for innovations.

In the past, the army has been criticized for its handling of such schemes. In 1999, for example, it awarded a \$45-million, five-year grant to the University of Southern California without taking bids from other universities (see *Nature* 400, 808; 1999). About two dozen major universities have expressed interest in the new institute.

Supernova study shows how ancients saw the light

Washington Details of an exploding star that dazzled sky-watchers as far apart as Egypt and Switzerland in 1006 have been revealed by US researchers. Chinese astronomers called it the "visiting star", and reported that after it first appeared on 1 May in that year it remained visible for months, even in daylight.

Frank Winkler, an astronomer at Middlebury College in Vermont, and colleagues have now used the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory in Chile to probe the speed and velocity of the expanding shell of gas surrounding the site of the explosion.

They found that the supernova lies about 7,100 light years from Earth, and would have had a brightness between that of the Moon and Venus. "There's no doubt that this would have been a truly dazzling sight," says Winkler. "In the spring of 1006, people could probably have read at midnight by its light."

Clarification In highlighting problems in deposited sequence data of the rat genome, the editorial 'Sacrifice for the greater good?' (*Nature* 421, 875; 2003) did not make clear that such problems are common in pre-publication assemblies. We did not intend to imply that the rat sequence data are unusual in this respect.