

## Patent-searching used to assess novelty of research proposals

[PARIS] The European Commission in Brussels is testing the customized use of patent-searching techniques as a way of assessing the novelty of research proposals within its technology transfer programme.

A preliminary study of 100 proposals in the programme, known simply as 'Innovation', has classed 30 as innovative, but questioned the originality of 57 others. The test of the technique, known as Quick Scan, will now be extended to 1,000 proposals.

The research proposals were subjected to the standard novelty search as carried out by European Patent Office examiners, which involves a computer search of 30 million documents. Although a research proposal differs from a patent application, the commission claims that the use of customized procedures allowed the examiners to obtain "conclusive" results for 87 of the proposals.

Two projects budgeted at ECU500,000 (US\$575,000) have already been rejected as a result of the study, the resulting saving representing ten times the cost of the search.

## UCSF decides on second site in San Francisco

[SAN FRANCISCO] After years searching for an appropriate site for expansion, the University of California at San Francisco has decided to build its \$800-million second campus on 43 acres of waterfront land in a southern industrial district of San Francisco.

The city of San Francisco, keen to keep the university's jobs and prestige close by, gave 30 acres as an incentive, while the developer Catellus Development Corporation contributed 13 acres and concessions on streets, water lines and sewers.

The university had endured years of legal wrangling and battles with neighbourhood groups as plans for one site after another fell through. Residents living near prospective locations complained about parking problems, toxic emissions, animal testing, and unchecked growth, among other things.

## UK arrangements under scrutiny

[LONDON] Britain's new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has promised to study whether the post of chief scientific adviser, a position occupied by Sir Robert May, should remain within the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and also whether there is a case for uniting political responsibility for research councils with that for university funding.

In reply to a parliamentary question last week from Robert Jackson (Conservative,

Wantage), a former minister responsible for science, Blair said that both issues were being examined as part of a broad review of government arrangements for the organization of science being carried out by John Battle, the minister of state responsible for science in the DTI.

The government has already confirmed that, at least in the short term, both May and Sir John Cadogan, the director-general of the research councils, are to remain in their present positions, and that the budget for the Office of Science and Technology, including the research councils, will remain 'ring-fenced' within the DTI. It is also said to have decided to maintain the previous government's decision to freeze science spending over the next two years.

## Astrophysicists win 1997 Crafoord prize

[LONDON] The 1997 Crafoord prize has been awarded to the astrophysicists Sir Fred Hoyle and Edwin Salpeter for their "pioneering contributions" involving the study of nuclear reactions in the development of stars. The prize, estimated to be worth US\$500,000, is awarded annually by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in recognition of outstanding basic research in fields not covered by the Nobel prize.

Hoyle, former director of the Institute of Theoretical Astronomy at the University of Cambridge, coined the term 'big bang' to describe the now widely-accepted theory explaining the origins of the Universe. Salpeter, professor of astronomy and physics at Cornell University, is known for the 'Salpeter process', which describes how older stars have energy that allows them to continue to shine.

## Return to academia for EPA research head

[WASHINGTON] Robert Huggett, the marine scientist who has headed the US Environmental Protection Agency's research office since 1994, left this week to return to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Huggett says he has served his "allotted time" in the federal government and wants to return to research. "If I want to get back into academia, I can't stay away any longer," he says.

## Brookhaven staff told they will lose tenure

[WASHINGTON] Six hundred scientific staff at Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York, will lose the tenure arrangements that guarantee their posts when the laboratory gets a new contractor on 1 November. Staff were told of the change by Lyle Stewards, acting director, at a stormy,

three-hour meeting last week.

Staff members also received the required six-months notice of termination of their employment with Associated Universities Incorporated, which was dismissed last month as the Brookhaven contractor (see *Nature* 387, 114; 1997). But the US Department of Energy says that the new contractor "must agree to offer employment to virtually all Brookhaven employees at comparable pay and benefits, except for key management personnel" and will be a not-for-profit organization.

## Austria seeks European view of proposals

[MUNICH] The European Science Foundation (ESF) is to assess the scientific and technical cases for two competing proposals for a new medium-size national research facility in Austria. One of the proposed facilities, Austron, would provide a pulsed neutron source for basic and applied researchers. The other, Eurocryst, would provide a laboratory for crystal synthesis and research.

The Austrian government and the Austrian Academy of Science have asked the foundation to provide an independent assessment of the proposals because of the ESF's ability to bring a European perspective to issues facing a small country. The report will be completed before the end of the year.

## France may create genotyping centre

[PARIS] The French government has launched a feasibility study for a proposed national genotyping facility for multigenic diseases, to be built at the site of the Généthon laboratory at Evry, south of Paris. Dedicated to gene mapping and the localization of genes, the centre would extend Généthon's early landmark work in gene mapping and complement the planned FFr1-billion (US\$172-million) national gene sequencing centre nearby (see *Nature* 383, 466; 1996).

## Garden of Eden project gains lottery funding

[LONDON] The 'Garden of Eden' project, an ambitious scheme to create a series of domed greenhouses at a disused china clay pit in Cornwall, has been awarded £37 million (US\$61 million) from the proceeds of Britain's National Lottery. The domes, which will cover an area of eight hectares, will allow researchers to simulate a sub-Saharan desert, the vegetation of temperate and Mediterranean regions, and a rainforest (see *Nature* 379, 289; 1996). The scheme will cost £106 million, and is expected to attract 750,000 visitors each year. It is the brainchild of Tim Smit, a former record producer who restored a nearby Victorian garden.