

## Did extra label cause the scare that shut down Los Alamos?

**Washington** A pair of 'missing' computer disks that sparked a security scandal at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico may never have existed, according to a senator who oversees the laboratory.

The belief that disks of classified data had gone missing triggered the shut-down of the nuclear weapons laboratory last month and led its director, Pete Nanos, to criticize the "cowboy culture" of scientists working there (see *Nature* 430, 387; 2004).

But Senator Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico), who chairs the Senate committee that oversees the lab, says he now suspects a clerical error. Sources at the lab have suggested that security-coded labels were made up for disks that were never actually created.

"It may be what we have here is a false positive," Domenici said on 10 August. "But the entire situation only reinforces that we need to improve the inventory system."

Laboratory spokesman Kevin Roark declined to comment, citing an ongoing investigation into the incident.



Bird bath: a health worker disinfects ducks arriving at a poultry market in Hanoi.

## More avian flu deaths confirmed in Vietnam

**Tokyo** Avian influenza was the cause of three human deaths from a respiratory condition early this month, Vietnam has confirmed. But World Health Organization (WHO) officials have struggled to get the samples they need to characterize the viral strain involved and to judge the danger it may pose to public health.

On 16 August, Nguyen Thi Kim Tien, director of the Pasteur Institute in Ho Chi Minh City, confirmed that the sample from one victim contained the H5N1 virus — the same strain that killed 15 people in Vietnam and 8 in Thailand in February.

Peter Horby, a WHO epidemiologist in charge of infectious-disease surveillance in Vietnam, is not surprised to see sporadic human cases re-emerging. "It's what we would expect," he says.

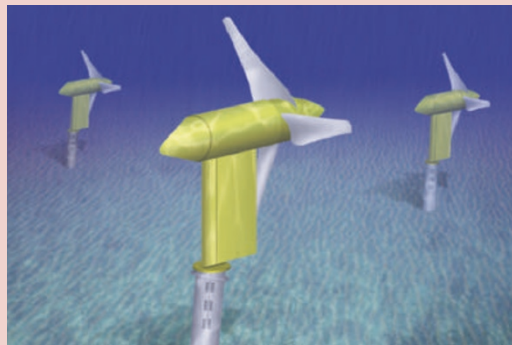
Still, Horby says it is essential that the

## Good tidings for alternative power in New York

**New York** Next month, the fishy inhabitants of New York's East River will acquire some sleek new neighbours. Verdant Power, an energy company based in Arlington, Virginia, intends to plunge six electricity turbines into the river, creating the United States' first tidal-power plant.

The plan is to attach the machines to concrete piles hammered into the bedrock (see right). As the tide surges in and out, the heads will pivot to face the current and the blades will spin. The turbines will generate just 200 kilowatts of power at peak output, enough to power perhaps 200 houses. But if everything goes according to plan, the farm could grow to 300 turbines.

The biggest tidal-power project to date is a



barrage at La Rance, France, with a capacity of 240 megawatts. Such barrages work like hydroelectric dams, holding back a head of water to power generators. But they are expensive and can damage estuarine ecosystems.

samples are tested further to gauge how much the virus has mutated. But as *Nature* went to press, WHO officials were still trying to arrange a meeting with a government minister, whose permission is needed before shipping samples overseas.

## Biosafety lab gets a rocky ride in Montana

**San Diego** No one, it seems, wants the war on bioterror conducted in their back yard. On 12 August, three environmental groups sued the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in an attempt to halt construction of a top-level biosafety laboratory in Montana.

The biosafety level 4 laboratory project at the NIH's Rocky Mountain Laboratories outside Missoula started about two years ago as part of a nationwide plan by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) to boost research on pathogens that could be used in terrorism.

Plans for a similar NIAID-funded lab at Boston University are already meeting spirited resistance from local residents. Federal officials had hoped for an easier ride in rural Montana. But the environmental groups — Friends of the Bitterroot, Women's Voices for the Earth and the Coalition for a Safe Lab — have filed a suit alleging that the plan has proceeded without an adequate environmental-impact assessment.

## Economist named as European science boss

**Munich** Scientists in Eastern Europe are celebrating the appointment of Janez Potocnik, from Slovenia, to the post of European commissioner for research.

The 46-year-old economist will succeed Philippe Busquin, a Belgian physicist who has been responsible for the research budget

of the European Union (EU) since 1999.

José Manuel Barroso, the designated president of the European Commission, announced his chosen team last week. The 25 commissioners make up the EU's executive.

Scientists in the ten states that joined the EU in May, who are worried about losing out in the scramble for EU funding, are delighted with Barroso's team, due to take office on 1 November. Hungarian László Kovacs will be responsible for energy, Cypriot Markos Kyprianou for health, and Slovak Ján Figel for education and training.

"This is a very promising signal," says Jerzy Langer, a solid-state physicist at the Polish Academy of Science's Institute of Physics in Warsaw, and an honorary member of Euroscience, a grassroots organization of European scientists.

## NIH told to get tough on outside interests

**Washington** The National Institutes of Health (NIH) must draft tougher agency-wide regulations on conflicts of interest, says the Office of Government Ethics (OGE), which serves as a watchdog for the executive branch of the US government.

Responding to allegations made by the *Los Angeles Times* about lucrative outside consultancies held by NIH scientists, NIH director Elias Zerhouni proposed rules on 22 June that would prohibit paid consulting for senior employees. But the OGE suggests an absolute ban for all personnel. It also wants responsibility for policing the rules to lie with the NIH's parent body, the Department of Health and Human Services.

NIH deputy-director Raynard Kington says: "We will work closely with colleagues in the Office of Government Ethics to develop the new regulations for the agency. We are working hard to get this right."