

Experts say US authorities should change patent laws

US universities and government agencies have much work to do to ensure that large-scale patenting of genes and proteins doesn't impede biomedical research, an expert panel says.

The increasingly complex maze of patents, licences and material-transfer agreements could slow research considerably, a committee of lawyers, scientists and business experts reported on 17 November. For instance, universities might restrict their investigators' activities in the wake of a 2002 court ruling, which held that researchers are not necessarily protected from patent-infringement charges — even if they do not intend to profit from their work.

The experts, organized by the National Academy of Sciences, recommended that patent standards be tightened and undergo scientific review, that researchers should avoid seeking patents on non-therapeutic genes and proteins, and that universities should streamline material-transfer agreements and protect their rights to distribute research materials. They also said Congress should consider passing laws to exempt universities and researchers from charges of patent infringement while doing basic research.

Europe presses ahead with plan to grab the headlines

The European Commission last week launched a programme to help European science news compete more strongly with news from the United States. The Communiqué initiative will develop a system to improve underperforming press operations in European research institutions and give European scientists the support they need to hit the headlines.

Launched in Brussels, the service is likely to involve a new central press association and initiatives to encourage European press officers to approach researchers more actively. Its organizers, which include the AlphaGalileo Foundation, Europe's Internet press centre for research in science and the arts, hope to obtain funding under the next four-year European Union Framework programme, starting in 2007.

Japanese craft hits trouble during asteroid landing

Japan's Hayabusa spacecraft failed to land on the asteroid Itokawa as planned this week, raising concerns about whether it will ever bring back dust samples.

On 12 November, the craft lost contact

Grizzlies set to lose protected status

Grizzly bears may soon lose some federal protection around one of their most famous locations, Yellowstone National Park.

On 15 November, the US Fish and Wildlife Service proposed removing the Yellowstone population of grizzlies (*Ursus arctos*) from the list of threatened and endangered species. Since 1975, when it was first listed, Yellowstone's grizzly population has grown from 220 bears to 600. More than 50,000 of the animals used to roam the United States. The proposal would not affect bears in the national park itself, but would affect those living around its boundaries in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho.

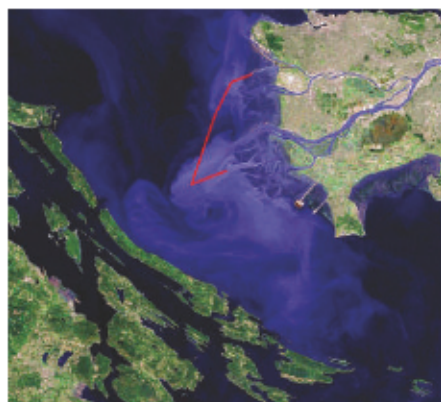
As the bears leave the list, another species is set to join. Last week, the government proposed listing a population of about 90 killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) that live in Washington state's Puget Sound. But Congress is currently considering legislation that would lessen the

with a tiny robot probe called Minerva. And on 20 November, Hayabusa experienced problems when it was less than 17 metres from its target. Scientists at the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) say it seemed to slide sideways along the asteroid, at a height of about 10 metres, for more than 30 minutes. The agency also temporarily lost contact with the craft. Mission scientists sent a signal for the craft to ascend, and Hayabusa's position-adjusting sensor made the craft skyrocket to as far as 100 kilometres from Itokawa.

As *Nature* went to press, Japan's space agency was considering whether to attempt a second landing.

Plans to monitor undersea activity start to take shape

Storms, earthquakes and even schools of fish will be monitored by an undersea observatory system near Vancouver, Canada, that is due to go online next month. Known as the Victoria Experimental Network Under the Sea (VENUS), this real-time system will use an array of sensors and



Laying the cable: the VENUS system will use monitors laid under the sea near Vancouver.

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protections conferred by the Endangered Species Act. A final decision on the whales and bears will be made in mid-February, after a period for public comment.

video cameras. A website will display live data and images.

The first phase of the Can\$10.3-million (US\$8.5-million) project will be four kilometres of cable laid next month under Patricia Bay. A 40-kilometre cable will then be positioned in the Strait of Georgia, one of Canada's busiest waterways.

Study assesses virtues of a home-grown agency boss

A survey has quantified the notion that government leaders are more effective if they climb the ranks of an agency, rather than being appointed to the top job from outside. David Lewis, a political scientist at Princeton University in New Jersey, used a management-rating tool to assess whether a programme had clear goals and strategies, and whether it was achieving its objectives.

The survey has a 100-point scale, and the average ranking is 61.7. Programmes headed by political appointees rate five or six points lower than those headed by career-based employees, Lewis reports.

Lewis also used the system to examine research and development (R&D) programmes in US agencies for *Nature*. "The effect is a little stronger," he says. Of the R&D agencies, the National Science Foundation programme dealing with logistics for polar research had the highest score, 95.3. The Small Business Innovation Research/Technology Transfer programme at the Department of Defense had the lowest score, just 23.5.

Correction

Our News story on the rift between stem-cell researchers Gerald Schatten and Woo Suk Hwang (see *Nature* 438, 262-263; 2005) misstated which partner gave an effusive public toast to the other. Schatten praised Hwang, not vice versa.