

Plan to standardize federal assessments discarded

The US National Academy of Sciences has rebuffed a White House plan to change the way that the federal government assesses the risks posed by chemicals and other potential hazards.

On 11 January, a panel chaired by John Ahearne, head of the ethics programme at Sigma Xi in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, ruled unanimously that the plan was "fundamentally flawed" and ought to be withdrawn. The plan included definitions of risk assessment and proposed standards for its uniform implementation by federal agencies.

Environmental groups welcomed the academy report: they had painted the plan — issued early last year by the White House Office of Management and Budget — as a back-door effort to loosen environmental regulation (see *Nature* 442, 242–243; 2006). White House officials said afterwards that the rules would not now be issued in their existing form.

India launches space recovery capsule

In what is seen as a prelude to a proposed manned space-flight programme (see *Nature* 444, 255; 2006), India has successfully launched its first recoverable space capsule.

The 550-kg capsule, which went up on 10 January, is expected to remain in orbit for about two weeks before parachuting back to Earth. It will help the Indian Space Research Organisation to evaluate re-entry and thermal protection technologies needed

for manned flights, officials say. The craft also carries two experiments on making alloys in zero-gravity conditions.

The capsule and a 680-kg high-resolution reconnaissance satellite were among the four payloads on board India's PSLV rocket, which took off from the Sriharikota launch pad on the country's east coast. A 6-kg nanosatellite from Argentina and a 56-kg microsatellite from Indonesia were also on board.

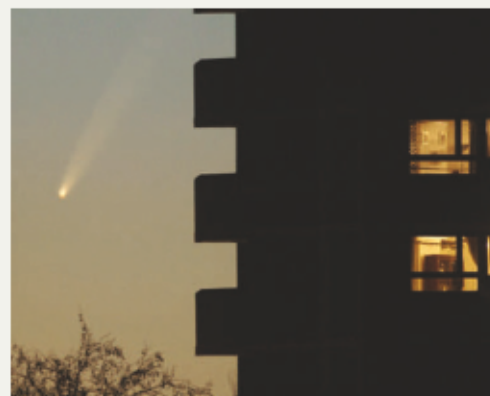
B. BABU/REUTERS



India's first recoverable space capsule is launched.

The night the comet came to town

Comet McNaught (right), named after Australian astronomer Robert McNaught (see www.nature.com/news), illuminated the streets of London on the evening of 10 January. Researchers at NASA's Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory (STEREO) and the international Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) scrambled to gain insight into its composition. "It's certainly the brightest comet seen from Earth in the past 30 years, perhaps even 40 years," says Jonathan Shanklin, director of the British Astronomical Association Comet Section.



A. MACDONALD/REUTERS

Gates grant to coordinate nations' public health

An international organization dedicated to building better links between national public-health agencies has received a US\$20-million, five-year grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The International Association of National Public Health Institutes aims to help poor nations combat health problems such as AIDS and bird flu by improving global communication between public-health officials. Since it was formed in January 2006 with a pilot grant, also from the Gates Foundation, it has attracted 39 members, including national public-health agencies from rich and poor nations.

The Gates grant was awarded jointly to Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia — home of Jeffrey Koplan, a former head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — and the Finnish National Public Health Institute. The association is the brainchild of Koplan, now its president, and his colleagues.

Whistleblower faces sacking by US government

A biologist employed by the US federal government to protect wildlife and the environment in Arizona is fighting for his career after his bosses sought to fire him for allegedly making unauthorized contact with outside groups.

Rex Wahl, at the US Bureau of Reclamation in Yuma, has been given 30 days from 9 January to respond to orders that he should be sacked for sending e-mails to other governmental agencies and to an environmental group. Bureau officials have described the communications as "conduct unbecoming a federal employee".

Wahl's lawyer, Paula Dinerstein of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility in Washington DC, says that

Wahl is being subjected to retaliation for properly upholding environmental laws, and should be entitled to legal protection as a whistleblower.

Korean stem-cell fraud claims another victim

More than a year has passed since the South Korean biologist Woo Suk Hwang was charged with fabricating data in highly cited papers about human cloning. Now, a former colleague has been found guilty of falsifying results and lying to officials investigating the case.

Jong Hyuk Park worked with Hwang in Seoul until 2004, when he joined the lab of Gerald Schatten, a stem-cell biologist at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and a co-author on some of Hwang's key papers. Park's work came under scrutiny last January when Schatten alerted the university to concerns about a paper that Park planned to submit to *Nature*.

The university's investigation, released on 9 January, concludes that Park intentionally falsified two figures in the paper. He then "repeatedly misrepresented" the data to Pittsburgh officials investigating the case and deleted records from the lab's server. Park left the university shortly after the allegations surfaced and is believed to have returned to South Korea.

NATURE NEWS INTERNSHIP

Nature is seeking an intern reporter to work full-time in either its Washington DC or London office starting July 2007 for six months. Applicants should be self-starting and have a keen news sense. This is a paid position.

The intern will write news and news features for *Nature* as well as online news for *Nature's* website, news@nature.com.

Please e-mail a covering letter, your CV or resume, and three clips to both Alexandra Witze, senior news and features editor (a.witze@nature.com), and Nicola Jones, online news editor (n.jones@nature.com), by 9 February. Put 'internship application' in the subject line.