

Threatening letters rattle evolutionary biologists

Evolutionary biologists at the University of Colorado in Boulder are on edge after receiving a number of threatening letters.

"I charge you and your devilionist colleagues with being the source of every imaginable evil," read part of an e-mail sent to biologist Michael Grant, and posted on the science blog *The Panda's Thumb*. Grant says 8–10 colleagues have received similar e-mails, letters and packages in recent days.

The letters are reportedly signed "Michael Korn". A website that seems to be written by the same alleged author describes him as a born-again Christian in Denver, Colorado. The Michael Korn who runs this website denies any knowledge of the letters or e-mails.

"In general, people are worried," Grant says. "We have one faculty member and one graduate student who are scared to go into the department." The university's Police Department is investigating.

Budget promises boost for German science

Germany's coalition government has proposed giving the Ministry of Education and Research a near-8% rise in its budget for 2008. If approved, the ministry would receive €9.2 billion (US\$12.7 billion) next year, a rise of €670 million on this year.

Energy research and environmental science, particularly climate change, would get €336 million of the extra funds, says research minister Annette Schavan. The Max Planck Society, which runs 80 basic-research institutes, and the DFG, Germany's main grant-giving agency, will each see a 3% rise in their budgets.

The increase would raise Germany's

science spending to 2.7% of its gross domestic product, close to the level of 3% envisaged by the European Commission for the European Union by 2010. The budget will be debated this autumn by the German parliament, which will vote on it in November.

US draws up short list of sites for bioweapons lab

Five sites are now competing to host a \$450-million biosecurity complex, the US government announced last week. Selected from a group of 18, the finalists for the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF) include sites in Texas, North Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia and Kansas.

The Department of Homeland Security expects to make a final decision in late 2008, and the NBAF will open in 2013. The facility will do research on potential bioweapons and replace the 50-year-old Plum Island Animal Disease Center in New York.

Not making the cut was Texas A&M University in College Station. Earlier this month, the US government halted biodefence research there after reports that workers had been exposed to two potential bioweapons. The university, which had been one of the 18 sites bidding to host the new lab, reported the incidents more than a year after they occurred (see *Nature* 448, 13; 2007).

Australia joins Europe's biology laboratory

The European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) has offered Australia associate membership. The seven-year arrangement begins in January 2008 and aims to encourage scientific exchange between Australia's top research centres and EMBL's five European laboratories.



The European Molecular Biology Laboratory is strengthening its links with Australia.

EMBL, a non-profit research organization with 19 member countries, pointed to Australia's strengths in stem-cell research and medical epidemiology as reasons for the offer. The Australian government and several universities will together pay the membership fee. An EMBL representative would only say that the financial contribution is "significant". In return, Australia will be able to send scientists to train at EMBL and will have access to the labs' research equipment.

Only European countries, and Israel, can become full members of EMBL. Australia is the organization's first associate member. EMBL says that other countries have expressed interest in associate membership, and discussions are ongoing.

US House backs more stringent drug regulation

The US House of Representatives has overwhelmingly passed a bill that would give the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) unprecedented power to police the safety of drugs after they have been approved and gone on sale.

The 403–16 vote on 11 July follows the US Senate's near-unanimous approval of a similar measure in May (see *Nature* 447, 247; 2007). Both bills allow the agency to insist on, rather than negotiate, drug-label changes, and let the FDA order further clinical studies once a drug has been marketed.

But a disagreement is brewing and may emerge when House and Senate lawmakers meet to resolve differences between the two bills later this summer. Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat, Massachusetts) has vowed to incorporate language making it possible for the FDA to approve copycat versions of biological drugs (see *Nature* 447, 629; 2007). The key House lawmaker in the bill, John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan), is opposed to this provision.

Because the bill is replacing a law that expires on 30 September and that provides more than \$300 million in funds to the FDA, lawmakers are under pressure to pass it quickly to avoid major layoffs at the \$1.9-billion agency.

The calf that came in from the cold

Meet Lyuba, a 4-month-old woolly mammoth found in the melting Siberian permafrost. Named after the wife of the reindeer breeder who discovered her, the mammoth emerged from at least 10,000 years of deep freeze, weighing 50 kilograms and retaining an unprecedented amount of her soft tissue. One of maybe five calves ever found, this specimen could have fetched millions of dollars on Russia's black market had it fallen into the wrong hands, says Larry Agenbroad, of the Mammoth Site in Hot Springs, South Dakota. Instead, Lyuba is headed for Jikei University School of Medicine in Tokyo, where researchers plan to perform computerized tomography scans on the calf.



S. CHERKASHIN/AP