

Search is on for origin of UK foot-and-mouth outbreak

The British government is investigating the source of a fresh outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease detected in cattle at two farms in Surrey on 3 and 7 August.

The inquiries have focused on an animal-research facility at Pirbright, around 7 kilometres from the farms. The strain of the virus found is believed to be one used to make vaccines in laboratories, including Pirbright, although test results had not been confirmed as *Nature* went to press.

The Institute for Animal Health — run by the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council — and the vaccine manufacturer Merial Animal Health share occupancy of the Pirbright facility. A national ban on the movement of livestock has been implemented.

A previous outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 led to the culling of more than 6 million cattle and cost the UK economy an estimated £8 billion (US\$16 billion).

Researcher drowns after vessel collision

A Russian marine biologist was drowned and an Italian colleague badly injured when the Italian research vessel *Thetis* sank off the coast of Sicily on 3 August.

Eight researchers and a crew of six were aboard the 200-tonne ship, testing laser instrumentation to measure biomass, when it was rammed in morning fog by a 55,000-tonne container ship registered in Panama.

The research ship sank within a few minutes, but Petr Mikhejchik, a scientist at the Russian Federal Research Institute of Fishery and Oceanography in Moscow, was trapped inside it. His body was



Vincenzo di Stefano (left) and Giusy Buscaino survived the sinking of the research vessel *Thetis*.

recovered by divers three days later.

The *Thetis* was commissioned in 2000 by the CNR Institute for Coastal Marine Environment in Naples and had been used in a wide range of research. Scientists are hoping to recover some instrumentation from the wreck.

Congress backs doubling of physics budget

The US Congress has passed a landmark bill that aims to double the budgets of the main agencies that fund research in engineering and the physical sciences.

The 21st Century Competitiveness Act recommends doubling the budgets of the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy's Office of Science over seven years, and that of most programmes at the National Institute of Standards and Technology over ten years.

The act boosts funding for science education and the transfer of technology from laboratories to industry. It also backs the creation of an office in the energy department to support high-risk research (see *Nature* 448, 524; 2007).

The bill was passed by both the House

and the Senate on 2 August and will become law if signed by President George W. Bush. The agencies' annual budgets are actually set by appropriations committees, and these are widely expected to follow the bill's recommendations, at least in the short term.

A. FUCARINI/AP

India hopes cash will lure youngsters to science

In a bid to attract more young people into scientific careers, India's government is boosting stipends for graduate students and postdocs by 50%. Under the plan, graduate students will now receive 12,000 rupees (US\$300) per month, and postdocs will start out on 16,000 rupees.

Announcing the move on 1 August, science secretary Thirumalachari Ramasami said that the government will spend 1.2 billion rupees each year to increase the stipends it pays to students at universities and government research labs.

The rise has been welcomed by the country's scientists. "This is an excellent step to enrich the research pool," says Rajan Sankaranarayanan, a structural biologist at the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad.

Bush to veto additional spending on water projects

President George W. Bush has threatened to veto a water-projects bill that would spend some \$20 billion on coastal, lake and wetland management and restoration projects.

Administration officials say that they object to the cost of the Water Resources Development Act, which is expected to be passed by the Senate and sent to the president this week. The bill includes hundreds of specific water projects, many of them favoured by environmentalists.

April Gromnicki, director of ecosystem restoration at the National Audubon Society, says the bill is long overdue, and that it includes \$6 billion for urgently needed restoration projects. And Senator Barbara Boxer (Democrat, California), chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, says that the bill has enough support in both houses of Congress to overturn a presidential veto.

Foo's paradise (cont.)

Why aren't the aliens here? How can young scientists escape the fear of scooping and communicate openly? Where next for the gut microbiome? These and many other equally stimulating questions occupied 200 scientists and technologists gathered at the Googleplex in Mountain View, California, at this year's SciFoo (see *Nature* 442, 848; 2006). Bloggers were there in force. Go to www.nature.com/scifoo to see what they encountered.

Archaeologists resume quest for hobbit remains

After a three-year hiatus, archaeologists are once more hunting for hobbits. A team from Indonesia and Australia has returned to the remote site on the island of Flores that yielded the first specimen of *Homo floresiensis*, metre-tall relatives of humans dubbed 'hobbits' on account of their stature.

Researchers from the Indonesian Centre for Archaeology in Jakarta and their colleagues resumed excavations at Liang Bua cave (pictured) on Flores in Indonesia last month. They hope to unearth more fossils of *H. floresiensis*, which lived until about 18,000 years ago.

The team has so far excavated to a depth of about six metres, reaching layers rich in artefacts and animal bones. These include bones of pygmy elephants, which are believed to have been eaten by hobbits. But no hominin bones have so far been found.



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