

## Clinton gives chimps a home

While expressing reservations about specific aspects of the measure, President Bill Clinton has signed the Chimpanzee Health Improvement, Maintenance, and Protection (CHIMP) Act into law. The measure is the outcome of a protracted legislative and public debate over how the National Institutes of Health (NIH) should handle the estimated 150 to 200 surplus chimpanzees currently housed in laboratory facilities.

Under the terms of the act, the NIH must hire an independent contractor to establish and maintain a system of "sanctuaries" for the extra animals, in which the chimpanzees will be kept in relatively large groups under natural conditions. The arrangement is cheaper and considered more humane than laboratory cages (*Nature Med.* 6, 9; 2000).



Under the terms of the act, the NIH must hire an independent contractor to establish and maintain a system of "sanctuaries" for the extra animals, in

Scientists had hoped that the surplus animals would remain available for future research, but once chimpanzees have been placed in sanctuaries, "for all intents and purposes it's going to be pretty much impossible to get them out," says John Strandberg, director of Comparative Medicine at the NIH. The Clinton administration agrees, and has stated that the criteria for removing chimpanzees from sanctuaries for future studies "are complex and give insufficient weight to important public health issues, which could prevent or delay valuable biomedical research."

Although the NIH currently has an excess of chimpanzees as a result of an aggressive breeding program at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, researchers argue that demand for the animals could increase sharply. The animals are also used in the development of hepatitis B vaccines, and are the best model available for hepatitis C infection studies.

The CHIMP Act raises financial concerns as well. As it does not provide funding for the NIH to implement the new system, money will have to be transferred from existing programs. NIH officials have not yet determined which projects will need to be cut, or by how much. In addition, the act ap-

pears to call for a sanctuary system operated by a single contractor. "If you only have one [contractor], and something happens to that entity, what kind of alternative is there? Some sort of a backup system strikes me as being very important for this," says Strandberg. Clinton called for the next Congress and President to remedy these defects in the CHIMP Act.

Alan Dove, Philadelphia

## BSE panic spreads to Spain

After recording its first two cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the northwestern region of Galicia, Spain is to revamp its outdated national zoonosis surveillance program. The country joins a growing number of others in Europe that is confronting BSE as a potential public health threat (*Nature Med.* 6, 1301; 2000).

Until last month, samples of cattle brain have been sent to the UK for immunohistochemical analysis, but following public complaints from leading veterinarian Juan Badiola of the University of Zaragoza that government laboratory resources are inadequate, the Spanish cabinet has approved a special budget of Ptas 2.42 billion (US \$13 million) to purchase 546,000 western-blot kits made by the Swiss-based company, Prionics, that can detect prions in brain and spinal cord tissue within hours. The government plans to extend analysis to around 350,000 animals.

Other measures include updating laboratories at slaughterhouses and training personnel to carry out testing at a cost of Ptas 3.5 million per lab, corpse retrieval costing Ptas 9 billion and removal and destruction of bovine specific risk materials (SRM) at a cost of Ptas 3.5 billion. All EU countries were compelled to destroy SRM as of 1 October, but the logistics of how Spain will cope with the task with only five incinerator companies is causing concern.

Markus Moser, co-founder of the University of Zürich-based spin-off, Prionics AG, told *Nature Medicine* that sales of the company's kits have increased exponentially following the identification of BSE in German cattle at the end of November. Moser anticipates "sales of kits in excess of one million per year."

Xavier Bosch, Spain

## Italy takes mature approach to stem cells

A report on the proposed direction of stem cell research in Italy, produced by an expert committee chaired by Nobel Prize winner Renato Dulbecco, demonstrates the influence of the Catholic Church on science within the country. It advocates experimentation with adult stem cells and somatic-cell nuclear transfer technology, but does not permit use of embryos and bans techniques that could lead to the creation of an embryo.

To strengthen its position that embryos should not be used, the Catholic University of Rome has opened a placenta bank that will carry out stem-cell research, headed by Salvatore Mancuso. Meanwhile, although the Dulbecco report endorses the use of umbilical cord and aborted fetus material, some researchers privately deplore its heavy bias toward adult stem-cell research and the decision to outlaw experimentation on

spare embryos from *in vitro* fertilization clinics. They feel this excludes Italian scientists from working on what is widely considered to be the most biologically optimal tissue for stem-cell research.

The report backs the development of a IL 15 billion (\$7.3 million US) project to investigate adult stem cell tissue, due to start this April. This will probably be headed by geneticist Angelo Vescovi from the San Raffaele institute, Milan, who tries to sound optimistic about the guidelines of the report, "They offer more than we expected," he says, "although it remains to be seen if a non-fertilized oocyte also has the potential to be totipotent." In addition, IL 40 billion has been announced to fund stem-cell research on a national basis and applications are invited by July.

Martina Ballmaier, Milan