

Random Samples:

Unclogging L.A.'s Streets

Motorists in Los Angeles County may soon find commuting a little easier, thanks to the reliable resonance of the cesium atom.

The county has recently begun a program to synchronize stop lights at more than 1000 of its busiest intersections with the National Institute of Standards and Technology's atomic clock in Boulder, Colorado. Currently, the lights are synchronized using dedicated phone lines, a so-called "hard wired" system that runs up huge phone bills and often breaks down. When a breakdown occurs, two things happen: motorists sit and wait and repair crews have to be dispatched to reset the lights. County officials say at least a dozen stop lights go out of synchronization each day, contributing greatly to L.A.'s legendary gridlock.

Under the new arrangement, a California firm called Precision Standard Time is installing time controllers on the stop lights, which will be linked to radio station WWV, the NIST service in Boulder. WWV has the most boring radio format in the business—it broadcasts nothing but the time, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The time transmissions are accurate to within one part in 100 billion, NIST says, and the atomic clock neither gains nor loses a second for 300,000 years. The new stop light controllers are accurate to within 2 milliseconds of the atom clock, the company says.

The county is spending more than \$13 million to improve the stop lights, but the savings should be impressive. County officials estimate motorists will save 55,000 hours a day in driving time and 22 million gallons of gas a year. They hope auto emissions (always a problem in L.A.) will be reduced by 7000 tons of pollutants a year.

"She wanted \$50 a week. I thought she was worth it."

—Burroughs Wellcome researcher George Hitchings, in the 29 January *New York Times Magazine*, recalling his job interview with Gertrude Elion in 1944. It seems she was. The two shared the 1988 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine with James Black for their work in drug research.

One Mailing List to Avoid

Some are calling it the ultimate in junk mail. It weighs 80 pounds, and arrives on your doorstep in four 20-pound boxes. It bears first-class postage stamps worth \$17.60.

It's the Department of Energy's final Environmental Impact Statement on the Superconducting Supercollider project. DOE spent \$1.3 million to mail the report to 17,000 interested parties, at least some of whom are less than thrilled to find it in their mail. "This is just a waste of taxpayers' money. I'm irritated. It's so funny, it's sick," Steve Jackson of Michi-

gan told the Associated Press. Jackson's involvement with the SSC was somewhat limited: he had once signed a petition against it.

Some members of Congress are similarly unenthusiastic about the mailing. Representative David E. Skaggs (D-CO) fired off a letter to then Secretary of Energy John S. Herrington demanding an explanation. In light of budget deficits, Skaggs wrote, "a decision to spend \$1.3 million in this way is absolutely appalling." Securing funding from Congress for the SSC will be difficult enough, Skaggs argued, without "furnishing an example of waste and mismanagement like this one at the outset."

Skaggs, a member of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, sent a copy of his letter to committee chairman Robert A. Roe (D-NJ), who promised darkly that the mailing would "indeed be the subject of scrutiny" during the committee's review of the site selection process early this year.

DOE defended the mailing by saying it was merely following the regulations of the President's Council on Environmental Quality regarding impact statements. Robert O. Hunter, director of DOE's Office of Energy Research, wrote Skaggs that DOE received some 5700 written and oral comments on the draft impact statement, and that it was necessary to send a copy of the final report to everyone who commented plus the states that had competed for the project, the various federal, state, and local agencies involved, landowners, libraries, reporters, and so forth.

The mailing, though admittedly large, was merely "consistent with normal federal agency practice," Hunter said.

■ GREGORY BYRNE

Banishing the "Mad Scientist"

For years, researchers have battled the "mad scientist" image. It's a perception that's popular in movies, television shows, and fiction, but you'd hardly expect to see it purveyed by people dealing with science professionals.

The folks at PGC Scientifics, a distributor of scientific products in Gaithersburg, Maryland, apparently don't feel that way. The cover of the PGS Winter 1989 catalog features two "mad scientists" forcing a blue liquid down the throat of a lab rat. The lab itself is something out of *Frankenstein*—a walled castle with

storm clouds brewing outside the window. The lab equipment includes beakers bubbling with dry ice clouds and a manacle bolted conspicuously to the wall.

Some of PGC's potential scientist customers really *are* mad. "It gives a bad public image of scientists both as

respecters of the worth and dignity of animals in research, and [it perpetuates] their undeserved reputation as mad scientists," says Edward B. Truitt, Jr., of Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine. Truitt and his colleagues were so angry they called PGC to complain.

PGC did not return a reporter's phone calls. But in a letter to Truitt and other protesters, Harry A. Skoll, president of PGC, says the cover was not meant "to demean or ridicule anyone, their work, or to suggest to imply animal abuse." The firm has stopped distributing the catalog, Skoll said, and will reissue it with a plain cover.

