Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Layoffs Ahead at Brookhaven?

An estimated 550 people would have been laid off if a subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee had got its wish last week—which was to chop $30 million from the operations budget of the Alternate Gradient Synchrotron at Brookhaven National Laboratory. That would have spelled death for the 30-year old synchrotron. Now the number in danger is 50 to 100.

That would be the consequence of a decision by the full committee to cut only $10 million, even though that would mean curtailing high energy research at the facility.

Brookhaven officials have hope, though. Late last week came word that the Office of Management and Budget wants to get the action reversed and has written D. Allan Bromley, Bush's incoming science adviser, warning that the cutbacks are destructive and unwarranted. President Bush's proposed budget called for full operation of the AGS.

Brookhaven's director Nick Samios says the laboratory had been planning to stop using the synchotron, which still serves some 800 scientists, in the next few years when construction of a new accelerator, the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider, is completed.

The $10-million cut was owing to a general shortage of funds, rather than because the committee wants to give an extra $25 million to the Superconducting Super Collider (above the $200 million appropriated by the House), according to a committee aide.

A final determination is expected next month.

Scientists as Brainy as MBAs

Young scientists will be relieved to know that their abilities are now considered to be on par with those of capitalists holding masters degrees in business administration. Wall Street is hiring more science and engineering graduates because of their quantitative and problem-solving skills, says the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. According to a press release, "some recruiters say engineering and science graduates have intellectual skills equal to MBAs, but don't have the inflated egos and unrealistic expectations some MBAs have."

Free NIH

Agency bosses are never happy being told what to do, and outgoing NIH director James B. Wyngaarden is no exception. Wyngaarden has had several pitched battles with the office of the assistant secretary for health at HHS, and he has few kind words for his former masters.

"The assistant secretary's office is a huge and I think unnecessary bureaucracy. They redo almost everything that an agency does," he says. "There are so many dead letter offices up there you don't know where things have gone."

Wyngaarden was particularly bothered by the delay in establishing departmental policy on scientific misconduct. After NIH sent its proposals to the assistant secretary's office, he says, "it took 14 months after it left the NIH to come back to us from the Office of Management and Budget. Twelve of those were at HHS."

During that time, Wyngaarden was on the hot seat at two congressional hearings where he was grilled about misconduct investigations. "I think a lot of that might have been avoided if we had been on a faster track," he says.

Animal Activists Get Stony Brook Files

The State University of New York at Stony Brook says it has released 700 research applications to animal welfare organizations, an action it says is unprecedented for any college or university in the state.

The surrender was in response to a freedom of information request following a state Supreme Court ruling last May that members of the public must be allowed to sit in on meetings of the university's animal care and use committee.

The court case is one of a rash of similar cases in which animal groups are suing to bring state universities under the coverage of "sunshine laws" for state advisory groups.

Stony Brook, which is concerned about the jeopardy to the security and confidentiality of research proposals, is appealing the decision on the grounds that the committees are set up by federal, and not state, law. It also says the ruling establishes different rules for private and public institutions.

Worm Bites Dad

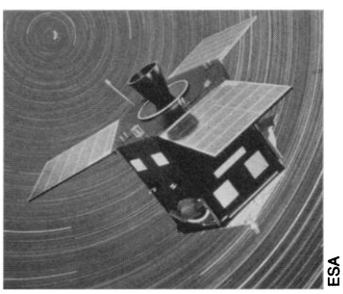
It's official: the father of the computer "worm" that rampaged madly through federal data networks last November is Robert Tappan Morris, according to an indictment released by the U.S. Department of Justice on 26 July. Conviction could result in a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison and a fine of $250,000.

Morris, a 26-year-old Cornell University graduate student in computer sciences (now suspended), has become the first test case under the 1986 Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. He is accused of accessing "intentionally and without authorization" six computers in which the federal government has an interest.

The indictment, handed up by a grand jury in Syracuse, New York, adds nothing to the findings of a Cornell inquiry published in April. It found that Morris acted alone in creating the worm, and that he "did not intend for it to do any damage to files or data" or to "bring so many computers to a halt."

The government's big task now will be to persuade a jury that Morris acted deliberately when he set the worm loose on the 6000-computer Arpanet.

Hipparcos on the Launch Pad



ESA

Taking the stars' measure.

Europe is determined to provide the world with a new foundation for understanding stellar evolution, galactic dynamics, and even the dimensions of the universe. Gathering the data will be the European Space Agency's new $300-million astrometry satellite, Hipparcos, currently scheduled for launch this month from Kourou, French Guiana.

Hipparcos is designed to pinpoint stars (the basis of astrometry) with an accuracy about 100 times what is possible from the ground. Once in orbit, it will spend 30 months measuring some 120,000 stars to an accuracy of 0.002 arc second—which means that from London, it could see a grapefruit atop the Empire State Building. This should greatly improve the measurement of the distance to a star by its parallax: a tiny back-and-forth motion due to our changing perspective as Earth orbits the sun. The data should also give new information on a star's "proper" motion: its tiny but steady drift across the sky as it follows its orbit through the galaxy. ■