Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Mouse Lab Bailout Urged

The big fire last May at the Jackson Laboratory, which resulted in the loss of a half a million research mice, has got researchers so worried that NIH this month convened a panel for a day-and-a-half exploration of the impacts on research.

The lab is seeking a congressional appropriation of $25 million to rebuild the facility (*Science*, 18 August, p. 697). Lab director Kenneth Paigen explained that insurance money will only cover one-third of the costs, a loan would end up costing the lab $69 million, and adequate private contributions could not possibly be mustered. He pointed out that $25 million is peanuts compared with the $600 to $700 million worth of research that could be affected.

Paigen said a survey of "important" mouse-based research reports published this year showed that almost 90% of them involved Jackson mice, indicating reliance on JAX products "to an extent that even surprised us." He said the lab has heard from hundreds of scientists worrying about where their next mouse is coming from. And a phone survey revealed "a surprising number of investigators who actually showed psychological symptoms and stress reactions" to the disaster.

The panel tentatively decided in favor of some kind of grant-in-aid, up to whatever a peer group deems appropriate. It will issue a report on 5 October.

Faculty Trends

The end-of-the-century faculty crunch—caused by increasing retirements and the growth in the student-aged population in the late '90s—is already beginning, according to two recent reports.

The latest "campus trends" survey by the American Council on Education reports that half of all colleges and universities say it now takes longer to find qualified applicants for full-time positions. Half also say they are having a harder time getting top applicants to accept the jobs offered them—compared with 37% last year. Problems are occurring mainly in fields such as computer science, business, math, and the health professions.

Meanwhile, a study by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation predicts that by the latter part of the decade, there will be fewer applicants than there are job openings. A shortage of more than 6,000 teachers by 2000 is seen if the production of doctorates is not beefed up. Shortfalls are predicted to be even greater in the social sciences and humanities than in the natural sciences.

With a sellers' market looming, academics may get even happier than they already are. A recent survey by the Carnegie Foundation of 5,500 college and university professors indicates that, while overstressed and underpaid, they are on the whole pretty satisfied.

Although 53% of the professors reported their salaries as "fair" or worse, and two-thirds did not think much of their campus administrations, faculty members are reportedly feeling more optimistic than they did 5 years ago. Forty percent said that all aspects of their lives are subordinated to their work. Nonetheless, 80% said they'd become college teachers if they had it to do over.

Refuseniks in Limbo

With Soviet emigration increasing yearly, and political prisoners being released, who would guess that there's still a refusenik problem?

But there is, according to the Committee of Concerned Scientists in New York. Although Jewish emigration has been soaring—this year's number may exceed 48,000, compared with about 19,000 in 1988—there is still a hard core of about 100 scientists and engineers, most of them Jewish, who have been living in limbo for periods of 5 to 16 years.

Committee director Dorothy Hirsch says the main reason is that they are said to have access to classified information. Whereas scientist-refuseniks used to be predominantly in physics and math, they are now mainly in biology and chemistry. Hirsch says there is speculation in Moscow that some of these scientists may have been involved in work related to biological and chemical warfare.

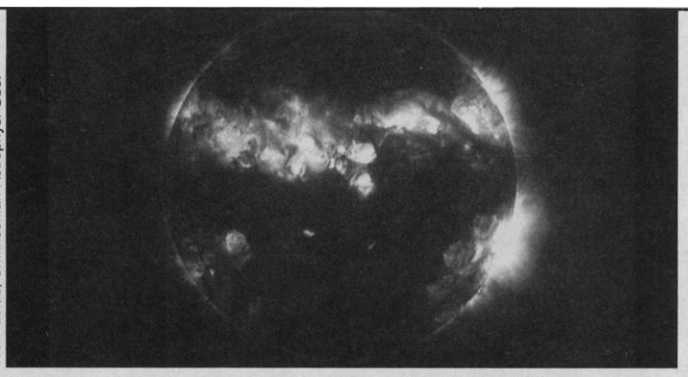
Soviet officials have been promising that the problem will soon be cleared up with a new law making 5 years the maximum waiting period. But new obstacles loom for those who want to come to the United States. The Administration, swamped with requests from refugees from all over the world, wants to cut down on the numbers of Soviet Jews eligible for refugee status.

Space Station Design Up in the Air

Don't be alarmed if you can't remember what the U.S. space station is supposed to look like or do. Congress doesn't know either, even though its appropriations committees have just agreed to plunk down $1.6 to $1.8 billion for it in fiscal 1990.

Apparently no one knows exactly what the station will look like because its design is being redone once again. A NASA spokesman says a new, scaled-back, money-saving design should be finished by 22 September. If approved, it might be made public at the end of the month—just about the time when Congress should be done with the budget.

Although Congress may be content with this approach, NASA's international partners in the venture are finding it unsettling. When they met recently with U.S. officials for the first big review of the station, the French and German delegates, among others, expressed "great concern" that proposed design changes would delay their parts of the station more than the U.S. segment. A reduction in power may also render the European and Japanese modules unusable as research labs, unless new power sources are added. Asks one European: "Can the partners really invest billions of dollars" not knowing when they will be able to use the station?



Leon Golub, Smithsonian Astrophys. Obs.

An angry sun approaches its peak of activity. This x-ray image obtained on a sounding rocket reveals, in the greatest detail ever, the solar corona as the sun heads for the maximum next spring in its 11-year cycle. According to other observations, the sun still seems to be on track to equal the record peak in flare and sunspot activity seen in 1958. Activity should peak around March 1990, but it and its terrestrial effects—aurora, communications interference, and electrical power disruptions—will remain high for several years.