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Clinton to Sign (Irrelevant?) Treaty

Earlier this week, President Bill Clinton was expected to sign the Convention on Biological Diversity, the treaty that embroiled the White House in controversy last June when former President George Bush failed to sign it at a United Nations conference in Rio de Janeiro. But some science policy experts say Clinton's signature may have more symbolic than practical value.

The biodiversity treaty calls for both developed and developing countries to conserve the world's ecosystems, many of which harbor vanishing or undiscovered species of life. The United States is one of a handful of countries that has refused to sign the treaty. The reason: U.S. patent officials and the biotechnology industry warned that portions of the treaty concerning technology transfer implied compulsory licensing, such that a biotech firm that developed a product from a



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What biodiversity treaty? INBio researchers don't need the treaty to collect specimens for Merck.

native species might be required to grant the right to market the product to the country where the species originated (*Science*, 19 June 1992, p. 1624).

Last April, Clinton announced he would sign the treaty as soon as the White House spelled out the U.S. interpretation of the

tech-transfer language, presumably in a way that protects U.S. interests. A draft statement is now circulating in the biodiversity community; it does little to clarify the U.S. position, saying only that licensing contracts would be "voluntarily agreed to by all parties."

Some legal experts are skeptical the treaty will change the status quo. "The treaty's practically irrelevant," asserts John Barton, a Stanford law professor, who points to agreements already in place, such as one that allows Merck & Co. to analyze biological samples collected by Costa Rica's National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) in exchange for up-front payments and royalties, half of which Costa Rica will invest in conservation (*Science*, 22 May 1992, p. 1142). Perhaps the sole benefit of signing, Barton says, is that the United States will get a vote in discussions about how to implement the treaty. "The benefits [of signing] are not immediately obvious," agrees a White House source.

UC Faculty Shun Research Corporation

Faculty opposition has forced the University of California (UC) to shelve a proposal to launch a for-profit corporation to commercialize UC research.

Last December, UC officials unveiled plans to create the University of California Technology Development Co. (UCTDC), which would fund startup companies and give UC researchers cash to develop inventions (*Science*, 18 December 1992, p. 1875). UC also conceived a companion non-profit foundation to oversee patenting and licensing.

But UCTDC's days may be numbered—at zero. "The corporation is definitely on hold," UC Davis vice chancellor for research Robert Shelton announced at a Cold Spring Harbor meeting last month. Many UC researchers have complained publicly that UCTDC could compromise academic integrity, and have argued that UC should take a less active role in technology development. (Similar concerns from faculty torpedoed a tech-transfer company that Harvard University proposed in 1980.) Says a UC spokesperson, "We were taken somewhat by surprise by the level of anxiety expressed."

Don't expect UC to resurrect the proposal any time soon. "If I was a betting man, I would bet that this will never come about," Shelton says. The university does still intend to establish the less controversial nonprofit foundation, a spokesman says.

Scientist Accused of Theft Retains Post

More than 3 months after the state of Hawaii wrapped up an embezzlement case against the chairman of the Department of Tropical Medicine at the University of Hawaii (UH), academic officials have yet to discipline the professor. This has dismayed several faculty members, who claim the situation may make it hard to recruit new scientists.



Wasim Siddiqui

dered radio bracelet to alert police to his whereabouts. But the university has not taken action against Siddiqui, who—according to the school paper, *Voice of Hawaii*, continues to draw a salary of \$92,340.

University officials declined to comment on the case other than to say that steps are being taken to launch an academic review...soon. Goya says University lawyers are attempting

to recover through a civil suit an additional \$250,000, which they allege Siddiqui diverted from university accounts. Siddiqui declined to return phone messages left at his lab.

Faculty in the Tropical Medicine Department are eager to clean house as soon as possible. Says professor Nyven Marchette: "We have an acting chairman, and AID is continuing to give us money," and he insists that the department has never been "under indictment."

NSF Budget Starts Off Right

Don't count on the specific figures, but if last week's congressional action on the National Science Foundation (NSF) budget is any indication, this may not be such a bad year for science after all.

In the first step of a budget process that may last until the end of September, the House of Representatives appropriations subcommittee that has jurisdiction over NSF gave the agency \$3.02 billion for 1994—a whopping 11% increase (10% for NSF's research components) over 1993. That number is sure to change before the budget game is over, but research groups were ecstatic last week at the good start.

There's a hitch, of course—the subcommittee also gave the space station (which comes out of the same budget pot as NSF) some \$450 million less than the Administration wanted. That cut was easy enough with the space station currently mired in redesign limbo (*Science*, 28 May, p. 1228), but Congress will have to come to grips with the project later this summer. If legislators substantially cut—or even kill—the space station, NSF could come close to President Clinton's full request of a 16% increase, aides say. But if the project survives intact, last week's NSF numbers may not.