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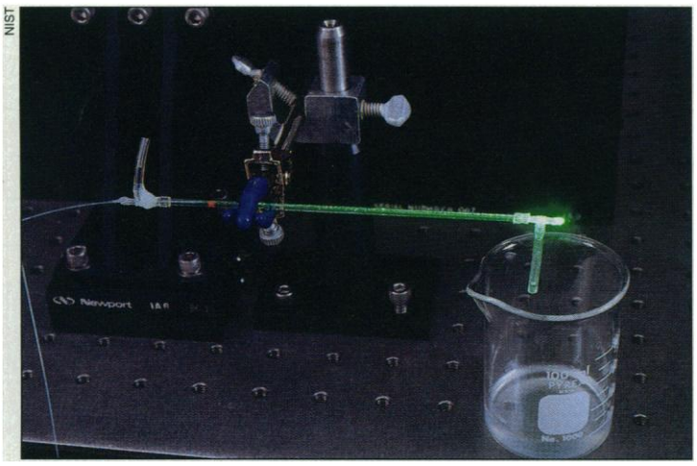

NIST

Brave new biosensor. NIST consortium will pool research on biosensors, such as this NIST device to measure DNA-binding carcinogens.

NIST to Aid Biosensor Industry

Imagine the U.S. biotechnology industry as a herd of antelopes running far and fast ahead of the wolves of foreign competition. Well, there's always a few antelope that lag behind the rest—in biotech, this bunch may well be the sector developing biosensors, devices that employ enzymes, antibodies, or other biomaterials to analyze medical or environmental samples. Now the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is offering to help this sector by organizing a new research club: the Consortium on Advanced Biosensors (CAB).

"Our belief is that American companies are not necessarily leading the pack," says biologist Howard Weetall, NIST's consortium manager and an industry veteran with 40 patents under his belt. To remedy the perceived U.S. weakness, NIST, president Bill Clinton's flagship agency for improving U.S. technology, will provide industry researchers with lab space and equipment to do research on fundamental problems plaguing the industry—such as how to increase the signal-to-noise ratio of biosensors, and how to test fragile sensors without destroying them, Weetall says.

CAB members will each give $30,000 a year to NIST and will provide researchers. So far, six firms are in: Becton-Dickinson Advanced Diagnostics, Ciba-Corning Diagnostics, Dow Chemical, DuPont, Miles Inc., and Omicron.

Federal Belt-Tightening Imperils User Fees

It was a feat even the Frugal Gourmet would've been proud of: When Congress cooked up a bill last year to allow the Food and Administration (FDA) to charge firms up to $233,000 for each drug application, both taxee (industry) and taxer (FDA) found it palatable. But now the soufflé may collapse: Last week a Senate committee voted against giving FDA the money to enact the "user-fee" law.

If the original plan were to overcome Senate objections, FDA says it would rake in about $327 million in user fees over the next 5 years, allowing the agency to hire 600 scientists to review applications, a move FDA believes would speed up the drug-approval process. But before FDA can add staff, the agency must get congressional approval. That's why the Senate vote to deny FDA $36 million for new staff was so crucial.

Why would Congress try to undermine such a popular deal? In a report, the appropriations subcommittee points its finger at the Administration, noting that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) hasn't given the agency permission to hire more employees, and, in fact, is trying to adhere to a White House directive to eliminate 100,000 jobs in federal agencies in order to help cut the deficit.

FDA's parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, has asked OMB to waive the order for user-fee staff. No word from OMB yet, but some observers predict that pressure from Congress will force the office to serve up some good news for FDA fast.

Whale Management Body Irks Scientists

Is the International Whaling Commission (IWC) favoring politics over science? That's the contention of several IWC scientific advisers, who have rebelled against the commission's refusal to accept a mechanism for calculating "safe" numbers of whale kills.

The furor has provoked the resignation of the IWC's scientific committee chair, population biologist Philip Hammond of the Sea Mammal Research Unit in Cambridge, England. Hammond says he stepped down because the IWC ignored advice it sought from his panel. The IWC, a 40-nation body that regulates whaling, gave science a cold shoulder at its annual meeting in Japan, last month, says Hammond, when it failed to adopt a computer model designed to set quotas of whale catches that would not harm a population. The panel had spent 5 years developing the model, which the IWC must adopt before it can lift its 7-year-old ban on commercial whaling.

Most observers agree that the IWC has shied away from the model because some member governments fear a public backlash to renewed whaling. Hammond and other advisers argue that IWC should accept the model first, then ask political questions later.

Such bruised feelings have cast doubt on the committee's future. In his resignation letter, Hammond questioned the point of retaining a committee whose advice is "treated with such contempt." And with the pro-whaling IWC countries—Norway and Japan—furious with the outcome of last month's meeting, some observers believe the IWC may have harpooned itself.

Two Names in NIH Director Hat

It's a two-horse race for the next director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), say sources close to the selection process. Outsiders can't be ruled out, but neck and neck down the homestretch are: Nobelist Harold Varmus and Yale provost Judith Rodin.

Varmus, a University of California, San Francisco, virologist who codiscovered cellular oncogenes, has the advantage of strong ties to the basic research community, Administration sources say. On the other hand, they note that Rodin, a psychologist, may be more in tune with what the Administration sees as a growing role for NIH: disease prevention research. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Donna Shalala, according to her staff, is particularly interested in applying more behavioral research to disease prevention.

Either way, HHS officials are claiming a victory of sorts: The White House agreed to choose from the list of candidates provided by a search committee headed by new National Academy of Sciences president Bruce Alberts. An announcement of the final choice is expected before the current NIH director, Bernadine Healy, leaves on 30 June.

The next director may receive a welcoming present: Last week a House appropriations subcommittee slated the NIH's 1994 budget for a 5.9% increase over this year's funding. The Senate may be less generous, but given the Administration's requested 3.2% raise, things look rosier indeed for NIH.

MIKKEL AALAND; MICHAEL MARSLAND

Judith Rodin, Harold Varmus.