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Bones of contention. Legislation may limit what museum expeditions, like this Smithsonian dig in Wyoming, can do with fossils they unearth.

Paleontologists Restore Fossil Bill Debate

Paleontology and public policy don't often go head to head. But proposed U.S. legislation to regulate the collection of vertebrate fossils was expected to be the focus of heated debate at this week's meeting of the Society for Vertebrate Paleontology in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Many bills never become law, and this one hasn't even been introduced to Congress for consideration this year. But the legislation—now being drafted by Senator Max Baucus (D–MT)—has upset commercial and amateur collectors, who argue it would shut them out of the fossil hunt by allowing excavation only by their academic counterparts. Many academics, on the other hand, feel the law is needed to prevent rapacious private collectors from plundering specimens.

The bill would forbid the sale of fossils taken from federal land, which would put many commercial collectors on the wrong side of the law; unsurprisingly, collectors want to see the bill go extinct. But museums also fear the legislation could hamper science, says Richard Koontz, attorney for the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. According to the latest draft, rights to any fossils unearthed from federal lands would be held by an unspecified "trustee." If the bill intends the trustee to be the U.S. government, "that means no one would be able to drill into the bones or do any destructive analysis," asserts Koontz, because they would be liable for damaging government property. But if a museum could be the trustee, Koontz says, such analyses could proceed.

This debate may yet spill out of the paleontology meeting onto the Senate floor. Senator Baucus introduced a similar bill last year, but it never made it to a vote. This year Baucus' office has fiddled with the language, permitting, for instance, more opportunities for amateur collectors. Baucus hopes such changes will garner more scientific support.

Varmus Lingers as Lane Takes Office

As the Clinton Administration nears the end of the first quarter, it's still waiting for some of its team to enter the game. Just take the directorships of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NSF chief is now officially on board, while the other is still standing on the sidelines.

Three months after President Clinton tapped Harold Varmus as NIH director, the virologist is still waiting for a Senate confirmation hearing. Don't blame the delay on Congress, however. In fairness, it was only last week that the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee got all of Varmus' documents.

Even so, on 6 October the busy committee found time to approve Neal Lane as NSF director, one of several appointments it approved with nary a debate or public vetting. The next day the full Senate followed suit, making Lane NSF's 10th director.

Lane continues a recent tradition of NSF directors forsaking a hefty salary for a chance to shape federal science policy. As professor of physics and provost of Rice University, Lane earned $290,600 last year. While generous by federal standards, his new salary is less than half that —$133,600.

EPA Lead Study Under Diverse Attack

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) scientists have a tough job: Because their work is used to buttress regulations, it's often criticized either by environmental groups for understating risks or by industry for exaggerating them. But in a recent analysis of lead in soil, EPA scientists have incurred the wrath of both camps and now must revise their document.

At the heart of the dispute is an EPA analysis of a 5-year, $15 million study the agency funded to test whether cleaning up soil with high lead concentrations would trigger a decrease in children's blood-lead levels. The stakes are high: EPA estimates high blood-lead levels may have slowed the cognitive development of some 3 million U.S. children.

The study, conducted in three cities (Baltimore, Boston, and Cincinnati), found a link between soil-lead levels and blood-lead levels. However, only in Boston did researchers note an appreciable reduction in blood-lead levels after removing lead-contaminated soil from test sites. Even so, the Boston group said soil abatement "is not likely to be a useful clinical intervention."

EPA concluded that cleaning up heavily contaminated soil "will measurably reduce blood lead" and may provide "peace of mind" to property owners.

Both the Lead Industries Association and the alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning blasted EPA for, in their opinions, arriving at unwarranted conclusions. The alliance insists money should be spent on cleaning up lead-based paint residue rather than soil, while the industry group finds no cause for alarm.

EPA toxicologist Lester Grant, who's overseeing the analysis, says the agency will address these concerns in a draft set for December.

Clinton to Unveil Greenhouse Gas Plan

Fast becoming the Bob ("Let's Make a Deal") Barker of environmental policy, the Clinton Administration has come up with a proposition it hopes will satisfy environmentalists and industry folk alike. By the end of next week, the Administration is expected to unveil a plan for stemming production of "greenhouse" gases that demands concessions from all parties in the debate.

The plan aims to cap the increase of gases produced in the burning of fossil fuels, such as carbon dioxide and methane. Concentrations of these gases have risen steadily during this century; if this rise remained unchecked, some scientists predict, the average global temperature could increase, leading to disastrous floods and droughts.

The goal of Clinton's plan is to reduce U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. But the plan is mostly voluntary, to industry's delight, and calls upon firms to devise methods of reducing emissions while rushing to develop "green" technologies to cut pollution.

Environmentalists, however, may be less enthusiastic about the proposal. They did persuade the Administration to include targets for mandatory reduction of certain ozone-depleting hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), temporary substitutes for the more damaging chlorofluorocarbons. But the Administration intends to offset this demand by adjusting its data on forest "sinks" to indicate they absorb certain other greenhouse gases—yielding a final target similar to the one that existed before HFCs were included. This outcome is designed to please all parties, though it's not aimed at winning awards for scientific precision.