SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE

WHO Panel: Death Penalty for Smallpox

The smallpox virus's days are numbered. Last week, a World Health Organization (WHO) scientific advisory committee voted unanimously to destroy the remaining lab stocks, held at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta and Moscow's Institute for Viral Preparations. The proposal is expected to be endorsed by WHO's member nations in May, clearing the way for the virus—which last claimed a human life in the late 1970s—to be wiped off of the planet by 30 June 1995.

The vote ends a bid for clemency launched by several leading virologists, who argued that the smallpox virus could yield valuable clues about viral pathogenicity (*Science*, 19 November 1993, p. 1225). The panel rejected that plea, ruling that such research was less important than studying viruses at-large. Besides, says WHO assistant director-general Ralph Henderson, the intent of WHO's smallpox eradication campaign was to totally eliminate the virus. WHO has a "duty of public trust" to complete the job, he argues.

Critics contend that the verdict was reached for political reasons. Smallpox research may be low priority now, says David Bishop, director of the Institute of Virology and Environmental Microbiology in Oxford, but a close relative of the virus might evolve similar characteristics, and scientists might regret the loss of research material. Bishop feels certain that "a cousin of smallpox will emerge from the wild at some stage."

The panel acknowledged these concerns but argued that scientists could continue studying smallpox genes using cloned smallpox DNA. Even then, the panel suggested measures to ensure the clones are under lock and key. To prevent smallpox genes from being incorporated into a related virus, the panel recommended setting up just two smallpox DNA repositories—at CDC and the Russian State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology in Koltsovo—and demanded that they send DNA only to labs that are not working on other pox viruses.

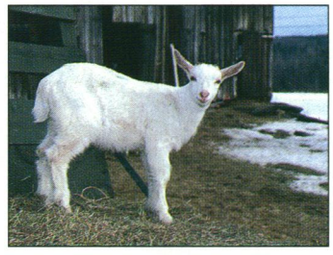
USDA Germ Plasm Bank for Livestock

To aid the great American quest for the perfect swine and other livestock breeds, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is building a repository for the sperm and eggs of commercially valuable species.

For years U.S. breeders have relied heavily on foreign germ plasm to improve their livestock. "North America has been far behind other countries in preserving" germ plasm, says Carolyn Christman, program coordinator for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, a nonprofit based in Pittsboro, North Carolina, that's helping USDA compile a genetic database of livestock breeds. "Why not save some of the sperm instead of trashing it?" Christman asks.

That's the kind of question your U.S. representative loves to answer, and in the 1990 Farm Bill, Congress ordered USDA to launch a national germ plasm program to collect and preserve genetic information primarily on cattle, goats, poultry, sheep, and swine. Genome mapping of several species has proceeded apace, but the germ plasm bank has been stymied by a lack of funds.

Despite a tight budget, USDA has begun renovating a facility in Beltsville, Maryland, to serve as a germ plasm repository, says USDA biologist Larry Johnson. He hopes to see the bank taking deposits early next year.



G. F. GODFREY/ANIMALS ANIMALS

They want your DNA, kid. USDA is building a livestock gene bank.

LHC Delay Averted?

Officials at CERN, the European particle physics laboratory in Geneva, are breathing a sigh of relief now that the lab's member states seem to have resolved a dispute that threatened to delay CERN's planned $2-billion Large Hadron Collider (LHC).

Britain and Germany have demanded that France and Switzerland—which benefit financially from CERN on their border—pay more toward the LHC. Germany wanted the countries to fund 10% of its cost on top of their CERN dues. France and Switzerland pledged a total of only 4.3% of the LHC's price tag.

A compromise was apparently reached at a meeting earlier this week, but details were unavailable as *Science* went to press. CERN officials now hope the LHC will win approval later this month.

Algerian Schools Open To Terrorist Threats

Education in Algeria is a risky business these days. University professors and students returned to school last week under threat of violence, but the term began without incident as security forces stood watch.

Algerian fundamentalists began a terrorist campaign in 1992 after the secular government canceled elections in which an Islamic political party was favored to win. Since then, about 30 teachers have been killed and hundreds of schools and universities ransacked. Just last month a sociology professor was gunned down, and 2 weeks ago an engineering school was torched.

The Algerian government has deployed hundreds of police and soldiers to protect school children, university students, and teachers. However, warns one Algerian scientist, terrorists remain a threat both inside and outside schools. "The situation in Algeria is dangerous not only for professors but for journalists and doctors," says a neuroscientist from the University of Science and Technology in Algiers who is working in the United States. "Every person opposed to terrorism is a target," he says.

California Societies Seek to Restore Tobacco Research Fund

Until the state legislature voted to slash it 2 months ago, California had one of the largest research programs in the United States devoted to the hazards of tobacco. Now, the program is in limbo, while two nonprofit groups are trying to restore its vitality. The California chapters of the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Society (ALS) are suing the state, charging that it "illegally diverted" research funds.

The research program arose from Proposition 99, a tobacco tax enacted by California voters in 1988. It states that tax revenues, an estimated $450 million in the next fiscal year, are to go to research, health education, and medical services designed to counteract smoking. Last July, however, when the legislature reauthorized the act, it voted to divert 80% of the research funds to medical services and evaluation of other Proposition 99 programs. The result: Instead of having a $50-million budget over the next 2 years, the University of California's Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program (TRDRP) will only have $8 million.

Last week, the two California societies filed a petition in Sacramento Superior Court seeking to restore the remaining $42 million to research. "The reason people voted for Prop 99 was to fund anti-tobacco education and to find cures for tobacco-related diseases," says physician Spencer Koerner, chair of ALS of California. A court hearing has been set for 7 October.

In the meantime, nearly 200 TRDRP-funded researchers have been left high and dry. "Unless and until such litigation and subsequent legislation are successful, TRDRP will not be able to award any additional grants," TRDRP director Charles Gruder said in an 8 July letter to one program researcher.