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Top Panel Calls for More Ecology Sites

Two buzzwords these days—biodiversity and ecosystem management—may soon get a better scientific underpinning. In a draft report released on the Internet last week, a White House panel calls for a federal effort to “discover, describe, inventory, and monitor the world’s organisms.”

Commissioned by the National Science and Technology Council, the report assessed research programs at nine federal agencies and offered a strategy “to provide the fundamental information base for monitoring and surveying biological information.” The report is the first fruit of a year-long effort by 150 federal and academic scientists “to get us thinking about where to go in the 1997 budget process,” says ecologist Mike Ruggiero of the National Biological Service.



Taking a good, long look. Federal report calls for expanded network of ecological research sites, including NSF’s Toolik Lake in northern Alaska.

A key criticism in the report is that U.S. field stations—such as the National Science Foundation’s Long Term Ecological Research sites and United Nations-sponsored Biosphere Reserves—are “poorly integrated.” Findings at these sites, it says, “do not present consistent, comparable, and statistically valid pictures of trends in the nation’s biota.”

To address the problem, the report calls for a national network of ecosystem sites. One component would be a confederation of dozens of sites tasked to gather consistent data on target species. A second aim would be to select 50 sites for “long-term intensive observations.” The panel expects to issue an implementation plan by April.

Russian Parliament Discredits Spy Charges

A hearing in Russia’s parliament earlier this week to examine allegations of espionage against the International Science Foundation (ISF) turned into a lovefest for the funding body.

Testifying before three committees, ISF officials defended the foundation against charges—

aired in a report supposedly produced by Russia’s Federal Counterintelligence Service (FCS)—that its aid program for Russian scientists was intended to funnel technology to the United States (*Science*, 10 February, p. 779). But FCS officials ignored a request to testify, leaving the forum to ISF boosters. At the end of the 6-hour hearing, the committees

commended ISF for its work and urged the government to extend ISF’s privileged tax status to other Western funding agencies.

Coffee, Croissants, And Congress

A coalition of professional societies is hoping to educate new congressional staff about the importance of federal funding of science and technology with a series of breakfast briefings. But the info won’t be flowing in only one direction: The science lobbyists also hope to get to know the folks who will be setting the research agenda in the 104th Congress.

The first meeting, to be held next week on Capitol Hill, features three research maven from the biotech, materials science, and communications fields, discussing what co-organizer Kathleen Ream of the American Chemical Society calls “the non-linear nature of R&D.” The briefings are intended “to erase the misconception that you must choose between basic and applied research,” she says. A second briefing, on the federal R&D budget, is planned for March.

No End for Biotech Patent Woes?

Biotechnology thought it had won a victory when the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) announced last December that it would not require firms to provide clinical data showing a potential drug’s usefulness. But the victory may have been a mirage: In comments to be filed with PTO, the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) is expected to claim that examiners continue to reject patents over lack of clinical data.

Biotech officials insist that requiring clinical data puts them in a Catch-22: It’s hard, they say, to raise capital to test a product that isn’t patented, but companies can’t get a patent until they have conducted the tests. PTO took steps to resolve this problem when it issued guidelines stating that less expensive animal tests or in vitro data would suffice as evidence of effectiveness (*Science*, 6 January, p. 23).

In a meeting with PTO officials last week, however, several lawyers complained that examiners are still rejecting patent applications—but citing a different section of law. “The problem is just as bad as it was before,” asserts Melvin Blecher, a lawyer with Foley & Lardner. Blecher says examiners are rejecting patents under the “enablement” clause, which lays out guidance on a patent’s scope and operability.

BIO will air this concern in written comments. Based on PTO’s response to their original gripe, BIO officials predict a quick resolution.

CERN Sabotage May Delay 1995 Research

The European particle physics center, CERN, near Geneva was held to ransom last week by a technician who lab officials say removed 1300 electronic modules which control two of the lab’s accelerators and hid them around the site. Rumanian-born Nicolas Blazianu, who has worked at CERN for 27 years, was soon arrested by French police, and the modules, valued at \$800,000, were all found within a few days by a 50-member search team. But CERN officials are still assessing the extent of the damage and the effect it will have on research.

After a winter shutdown for maintenance, CERN was preparing to start work again on 1 April. But that schedule looks certain to be delayed, forcing the thousands of visiting physicists who come to the center every year to change their plans. “From our initial assessment, we believe the delay will be at least 2 weeks,” says spokesperson Neil Calder. Staff scientist Yves Dufour believes the delay, if it is much longer, could “make 1995 a lean year for the data we need to do our physics.”

Calder alleges that Blazianu “chose modules vital for the workings of the system.” The modules control two “pre-accelerators” whose beams eventually feed into CERN’s 27-kilometer Large Electron-Positron collider (LEP).

CERN officials confirmed reports that Blazianu demanded that the lab fire his estranged wife, who works there as an administrative assistant, in exchange for the modules’ return. Blazianu allegedly also demanded 2 million francs, although he did not specify French francs (giving him \$375,000) or Swiss francs (\$1.5 million).

“This is the first time in the 40 years of CERN’s existence that something like this has happened,” says Calder. “There’s not much one can do about somebody with an excellent 27-year professional record and who suddenly goes berserk,” he says.