SCIENCESCOPE

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Within reach. Scientists have found ship for voyage to biologically rich Kuril Islands.

Ship Swapping Saves Far East Expedition

An 11th-hour change of vessels has rescued a three-nation research expedition to the Kuril Islands, a little-studied archipelago off Japan's northern tip. The quick maneuver meant that 30 U.S., Japanese, and Russian scientists who were nearly stranded by Russia's budget woes were planning instead to don their mackinaws and set sail this week.

The Far Eastern Branch (FEB) of the Russian Academy of Sciences has been trying for weeks to find $70,000 to pay a dock fee to release from Vladivostok harbor the *Professor Bogorov*, a research vessel slated for the Kuril expedition (*Science*, 31 May, p. 1259). The fund-raising failed, but the Russians found an alternative: They switched to a larger ship in the FEB fleet, the 75-meter-long *Academik Oparin*, which had been refitted for tourism and for shipping products. "We have a bigger and better ship," says expedition chief Ted Pietsch, curator of fishes at Burke Memorial Washington State Museum.

The 6-week expedition is part of a 6-year, $1.2 million effort, funded in part by the National Science Foundation, to map the biological diversity of the Russian chain of 56 islands. The Soviet Union had strictly limited access to the Kurils, where it kept military garrisons, all but excluding the islands from scientific study. But the *Academik Oparin* may face physical rather than political barriers: The ship's 4.5-meter draft won't allow it to weigh anchor as close to the islands as the researchers had planned, so they—and a Japanese TV crew shooting a documentary—will spend more time each day on motorboats between ship and shore. Nevertheless, the team expects to carry out its full research agenda. The expedition, says Pietsch, is "alive and well."

Senator Questions Biomedicine Priorities

A senator in line to head a panel that sets policy for U.S. biomedical research thinks the government is making poor decisions in the way it allocates funds and that Congress could use some independent advice on how to spend health research dollars.

At a 17 July session to mark up a bill reauthorizing the National Institutes of Health, Senator Dan Coats (R–IN) criticized his colleagues for giving NIH specific directions on how to spend research funds and questioned NIH's own ability to sort out its priorities. Coats is the third-ranking Republican on the Labor and Human Resources Committee and a candidate to succeed current Chair Nancy Kassebaum (R–KS), who retires this year.

Coats's press secretary, Tim Goeglein, says the senator is especially concerned about the influence of lobbyists in deciding which diseases get attention. Asked for an example, Goeglein said "A disproportionate amount of funding goes to AIDS research," noting that diabetes, which affects far more Americans, receives much less money. Coats proposed an "objective" assessment of biomedical research priorities by the National Academy of Sciences.

Other panel members—including Senators Barbara Mikulski (D–MD) and Edward Kennedy (D–MA)—agreed that outside advice would be useful. But they didn't adopt wording calling for such a review. Instead, they endorsed the 3-year bill and promptly engaged in the kind of earmarking that Coats had decried—adding directives for NIH to spend more on Parkinson's disease, pediatrics, and diabetes.

Ariane 5 Failure Linked To Software Glitch

Software errors in the rocket's guidance system and inadequate prelaunch testing caused Europe's Ariane 5 launcher to fail on its 4 June maiden flight, according to an expert panel that investigated the accident. The mistakes caused Ariane 5 to veer off course and self-destruct 40 seconds after liftoff, throwing the future of the European Space Agency's (ESA's) programs into disarray (*Science*, 14 June, p. 1579).

At a packed press conference on 23 July at ESA's Paris headquarters, a panel of senior European scientists said that in essence, software controlling a key part of Ariane 5's guidance system stopped working when the rocket reached horizontal velocities much greater than those for which the software had been designed. This caused the guidance system to shut down, confusing the rocket's onboard flight computer, which then threw Ariane 5 wildly off course.

The panel was reluctant to assign blame for the failure, and ESA director Jean-Marie Luton added that "no one is guilty and we are all guilty." But the panel's report states that the software and guidance systems were "inadequately tested." In an earlier interview with *Science*, Roger Bonnet, ESA's science director, said that at one prelaunch meeting he had suggested there were gaps in documentation of Ariane 5's testing program, but was told this was not his concern.

Indeed, one of the report's 14 recommendations is for closer cooperation among the managers, designers, and contractors involved in Ariane 5, as well as "clear-cut authority and responsibility." This "human factor" was apparently a key cause of the Ariane 5 failure. ESA officials plan by mid-September to issue a list of specific steps to safeguard future launches. Meanwhile, the next launch date, originally set for this fall, has been rescheduled for next spring.

SBIR Backers Win Round One

The biotech community has beaten back an attack on a set-aside grants program for small businesses at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But a decision by the program's chief critic, Representative John Porter (R–IL), to remove legislative language that would have limited spending next year on the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program may be only a strategic retreat in the continuing battle over a governmentwide effort that will soon top a billion dollars (*Science*, 17 May, p. 942).

"Of course we're disappointed," says Pat White of the American Association of Immunologists, which had lobbied successfully for wording in a House spending bill that would require the average scores of SBIR proposals to match those of proposals submitted by individual investigators (*Science*, 21 June, p. 1733). "But we appreciate Mr. Porter's interest."

Last week Porter decided to drop the restrictive language in upcoming talks with the Senate over the 1997 bill in exchange for an NIH-sponsored conference on SBIR later this year. He said he would address concerns about quality by proposing that the NIH director have the authority to adjust spending levels at each institute to match the merit of proposals. At the same time, Porter told Representative Joe Kennedy (D–MA) in a private meeting that he would support the planned increase in SBIR's allocation, from 2% to 2.5% of NIH's extramural budget.

"Further discussion is good," says Chuck Ludlam of the trade group BIO, whose members benefit directly from the SBIR program. "But we're confident our view will prevail in the end."