

## DOE Takes Slow Pace In Lab Closures

Despite a serious budget crunch, Department of Energy (DOE) officials are in no rush to downsize their network of laboratories. DOE Deputy Secretary Charles Curtis said last week that the department will not close any of its large multipurpose labs, though it will review their strategic plans and begin looking at whether to shut down, consolidate, or privatize the seven labs with annual budgets less than \$50 million. But don't expect those reviews to have a big impact on the DOE budget until 1999, according to DOE officials.

DOE is taking a cautious approach because it fears that the Administration and Congress would shoot down proposals to streamline or abandon labs if they are not well thought out, says John McTague, a Ford vice president who also co-chairs the advisory Lab Operations Board



**Privatized future.** DOE oil lab transfer may be common fate.

with Curtis. For example, Curtis adds, it's important to take into account large decommissioning and environmental cleanup costs associated with closures.

By 1 November, the board will review how DOE managers carry out their R&D missions and whether they should collaborate more with industry and universities. In 1997, the review panel will move to an examination of the small labs, though it will not complete the results of that study in time to affect the president 1998 budget request to Congress. After that, the board

will look at the strategic plans of the large labs and whether they fit with DOE's direction. "We're looking for justification for each and every dollar spent," Curtis says.

But long-planned closures and consolidations are bearing fruit. Last week, the department said it will save \$25 million over the next 5 years by turning over the government's main oil research lab in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, to a private contractor. The 205 workers there will move to leased space; about 20 positions will be eliminated, and the government facility eventually will be sold. By the end of 1998, the privatized lab would be self-sustaining. DOE is also selling off a small federal environmental facility in Montana. But the savings may prove minor, for DOE officials say they will encourage the privatized labs to compete for DOE research funding.

## U.S. Joins Japan's Fight Against *E. coli*

With virulent bacteria affecting some 9,000 Japanese, the timing of the first U.S.-Japan Cooperative Medical Sciences Program conference on emerging diseases could not have been more fortuitous. The meeting in Kyoto received extensive media coverage in Japan, and has put such cooperation on a fast track.

For the next few weeks, U.S. and Japanese scientists will be working together to contain and pin down the cause of one of the largest outbreaks to date of *E. coli* 0157:H7. The bacteria appear to be associated with school lunches and has spread quickly among children in central Japan, near Kyoto, killing seven people. The toll exceeds that of a 1993 *E. coli* epidemic in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, which sickened 700 people and killed four.

The input from U.S. researchers at this and two other meetings in Japan last month helped drive home the value of working together, says Stephen Ostroff, an epidemiologist specializing in infectious diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. "We were looking for an area for cooperation, and this was certainly a good one," adds microbiologist Kay Washmuth from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Japanese government agrees. Even before Washmuth and Ostroff returned home last week, Japan invited a U.S. team to work with its health officials on determining the cause. U.S. medical personnel expect to benefit as well. "We've never seen an outbreak that's this extensive, so we can learn things that are helpful to us," Ostroff adds.

## Mars Finding a Boon to Exploration Plans

The announcement earlier this week that researchers have evidence that primitive life may have existed on ancient Mars comes at a fortuitous moment for planetary scientists. (A paper describing the findings will be published in next week's *Science*; it is now available electronically at <http://www.sciencemag.org/>) A flotilla of three U.S. and Russian spacecraft are poised for launch later this year to the Red Planet, followed by U.S. and Japanese probes in 1998. But what researchers really need now is a mission to bring Martian samples back to Earth for study. If NASA can get the money, the agency intends to speed up a sample return flight proposed for 2005 to 1998, agency officials say.

And the intriguing evidence of past life may gener-



**Life on Mars?** Fossil evidence may be contained in meteorite.

ate the political will for more aggressive exploration of Mars and the money it will require. President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore were enthusiastic about the paper's findings when NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin briefed them on 30 July at the White House, Administration officials say. If funds are to be provided to move up the sample return mission, a decision would have to be made before the 1998 budget goes to Congress.

NASA's current plans for Mars came under some criticism in a report released by the National Research Council 6 August, which warns that Goldin's faster-cheaper-better approach could shortchange some of the science returns. But given the new findings, the program likely faces an overhaul anyway.

## Bill Restricts Genetic Information Use

Attempts to prevent the misuse of genetic information are taking concrete shape on Capitol Hill. Last week, as part of an insurance reform measure, Congress approved legislation restricting the use of genetic test results. But advocates of such restrictions caution that the bill leaves large gaps.

The "Health Insurance Reform Act" approved by both House and Senate says insurance companies cannot consider genetic information—defined to include both test results and family history—a pre-existing medical condition unless a doctor has diagnosed a specific disease. The bill, which the president has said he will sign, prohibits insurance companies from using such information to deny a policyholder coverage if they change jobs.

Karen Rothenberg, Director of the Law and Health Care program at the University of Maryland, says the language addressing genetic information is a step in the right direction, but a small one. She says it does not protect the 40 million Americans who have no health insurance, and it does not prohibit insurance companies from charging higher rates. Rothenberg adds that the bill is no substitute for a comprehensive ban on all forms of genetic discrimination.