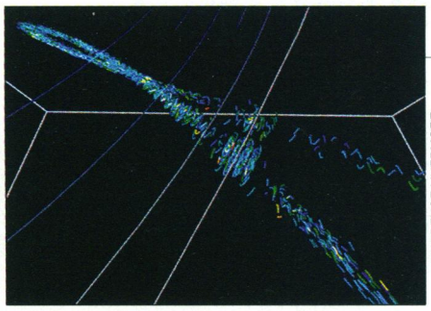
edited by JOCELYN KAISER



LAWRENCE LIVERMORE

Getting it together. High-capacity Internet links will allow collaboration on projects like this model of a fusion tokamak.

Research Agencies Cast a Wider InterNet

Merger frenzy is hitting the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) high-speed research network, the very high-speed Backbone Network Service (vBNS). The vBNS, a data superhighway that now connects five supercomputer centers at 155 megabits per second—four times the maximum capacity of the commercial Internet—is linking up with the specialized research networks run by the Department of Energy, NASA, the Defense Department, and some foreign networks. As connections are added, the result will be "the ability for researchers to collaborate in many more places," says Mark Luker, program director of networking at NSF.

Researchers have long been pushing for this kind of widespread interconnection—the equivalent for high-speed networks of the steps that connected disparate networks into the original Internet, says Tom DeFanti, a computer scientist at the University of Illinois, Chicago. "It's inevitable," he says. "It's along the lines of saying 20 years ago, 'Let's have an operating system that everybody can use.' " The links should open the way for data-intensive collaborations, such as ones in which distant researchers work with identical virtual-reality displays.

The mergers aren't the only thing expanding the scope of the vBNS. NSF last week announced its first 13 awards under a program that will fund high-speed links to the vBNS from universities (*Science*, 22 March, p. 1675).

GOP Platform Takes Science Personally

Although it may not be as hot a topic as crime or taxes, science does appear in the two major party platforms this year. And explicit GOP language about spending more to combat diabetes reaffirms the adage that all politics is local.

The Republican platform, adopted last week in San Diego, contains many more references to research than its Democratic counterpart being presented next week in Chicago. It lays down the principle that "federal science programs must emphasize basic research," and argues that tax and regulatory policies should encourage applied science in the private sector. It also calls for regulatory reform using "peer-reviewed risk assessments based on sound science."

The biggest plug for research, however, appears in a section on health care. Although the statement endorses "generous funding" for the National Institutes of Health and mentions several diseases, it devotes 12 lines to the economic value of curbing diabetes. No one is taking credit for these phrases, but last week a staffer for a diabetes lobby pointed to the source—House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA), who has stressed the importance of diabetes research in recent speeches and in a 31 July note to colleagues. A member of Gingrich's staff confirms that there's a family connection: The Speaker's mother-in-law suffers from diabetes.

In contrast, the Democrats' platform includes science under the general heading of "technology." This section endorses an R&D tax credit for businesses, offers support to "our system of research colleges and universities," and offers to "maintain vital investments in science and technology."

Plan to End Genetics Panel Troubles EPA

A plan to eliminate a panel that monitored genetic safety at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is raising concern among enforcers of environmental laws as well as others in the academic community. The problem: When NIH proposed to abolish its Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee in July, it failed to clarify what body would replace the RAC as overseer of federal guidelines covering the release of genetically engineered organisms to the environment.

This omission worries the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for example, because a gap in oversight may affect its plans to exempt from regulations research on transgenic microorganisms in contained facilities, provided such research remains under the purview of local biosafety committees that follow the NIH guidelines. In a 7 August comment to NIH, EPA Assistant Administrator Lynn Goldman says "it is unclear how and whether" these functions "would be continued" under the new, smaller advisory panel that NIH is proposing. Researchers at several universities have written NIH to say they have similar concerns about loss of continuity in overseeing gene therapy experiments if RAC disappears.

Lana Skirboll of NIH's Office of Science Policy says the matter of overseeing the transgenic release rules wasn't "purposefully" omitted from the proposal, and that NIH "didn't articulate clearly enough" that the new advisory panel will take over the functions.

The problem won't be resolved any time soon, it seems. NIH director Harold Varmus is now considering how to revise the guidelines, after which he must present them to a meeting of the RAC, and then publish them in the *Federal Register*, with time allowed for more comment—all before the RAC is abolished.

Top Aides Leaving NSF

New blood is one thing, but the National Science Foundation (NSF) may need an emergency transfusion of senior managers. The turnover has been so great that one assistant director has agreed to stay on another year—and serve as No. 2—to give NSF Director Neal Lane some continuity in the upper ranks.

The problem is mostly self-inflicted: NSF has a long-standing practice of signing up temporary heads for many of its seven research directorates so a steady flow of new talent will keep it on the cutting edge of science. But in the next 12 months many key officials are rotating out. The first to announce her departure was Cora Marrett, who returns this fall to the University of Wisconsin after 4 years as the first head of the social and behavioral sciences directorate. NSF hopes to name a replacement shortly.

Next was Paul Young, head of computer and engineering sciences, who left this month for the University of Washington after a 2-year stint. Last month Deputy Director Anne Petersen took a job with the Kellogg Foundation, effective 15 September. It could take months before a successor, who must be confirmed by the Senate, is in place. And the head of the geosciences directorate, Robert Corell, has announced he will retire next spring after 25 years with NSF.

In the midst of this turnover, Lane was able to persuade Joseph Bordogna, head of the engineering directorate since 1991, to delay for a year his planned return to the University of Pennsylvania and serve as Lane's acting deputy. Says Bordogna, "Things were looking a bit thin, and I agreed to stay on until we're back to a full team." Last week Lane thanked his departing aides for their service, but said he'd call them "when we need you on a volunteer basis."