



**On the move.** Biologists want more focused effort against invaders like brown tree snakes.

## Call for Exotic Species Task Force

U.S. ecosystems are losing the battle against invading species, say some scientists, who are planning to call for a high-level counterattack. Last week, two ecologists began gathering signatures to a draft letter posted on the Internet urging Vice President Al Gore to form a presidential commission on exotic species.

More than 20 federal agencies, from the Interior Department to the Coast Guard, try to

control alien species invading by land, sea, and rivers, says Don Schmitz, a biologist with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Yet, the invaders keep coming—from green crabs threatening the

San Francisco Bay food web, to venomous brown tree snakes menacing the biological diversity of Hawaii, to melaleuca, an Australian tree that's overtaking Florida. The damage can total billions of dollars per year, according to a 1993 Office of Technology Assessment report. "We're fighting a war on three fronts, and we're losing," Schmitz says.

The Internet letter, co-authored by Schmitz and Jim Carlton of Williams College, says federal efforts remain "piecemeal,

ad hoc, and reactive." For example, agencies seem to work in isolation. Even when a pest is eliminated from an area, Schmitz explains, if it persists on neighboring land managed by a different agency, it will inevitably spread back.

The letter proposes that Gore create a high-level office or task force that would coordinate government efforts. So far, more than 150 scientists and land managers have signed the letter—including top ecologists such as Harvard's E. O. Wilson, Dan Simberloff of Florida State University, and Peter Vitousek of Stanford University. "We feel this incredible sense of urgency," says Simberloff. "The longer you wait, the harder it becomes to do anything about [alien species]." To sign on, contact Schmitz at [schmitz\\_d@ngw.dep.state.fl.us](mailto:schmitz_d@ngw.dep.state.fl.us).

## Big Cut in FDA Biologics Research

The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) research has been under pressure from industry critics who question its value, and now the ax is falling. FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER)—which regulates biotech drugs and experimental protocols—is advising staff scientists that nearly 100 research positions may be cut over the next few years.

The news comes as FDA and drug companies discuss renewing the "user-fee act," which expires this year. The 1992 law has allowed FDA to charge companies fees for new drug applications so that the agency could hire more reviewers and speed the approval of new products. But the roughly 300 reviewers at CBER spend about half of their time doing research, which the companies view as wasted time. According to industry sources, the agency has signed on to a new plan that will slash research funded by user fees. Sources predict \$10 million will be cut from CBER's research budget of \$28 million over 5 years, and that 97 full-time research slots will be dropped.

An FDA spokesperson declined comment, as the user fee plan (which must also be approved by Congress) hasn't yet been made public. But John Bishop of CBER's cellular and gene therapies division says the center has already frozen new research hires. FDA doesn't expect to lay off scientists, however; rather, it plans to shift researcher-reviewers to full-time reviewing. "We're still going to do research," Bishop says. "But we have to figure out what research might be considered icing on the cake."

CBER may not be the only part of FDA where researchers face cutbacks, although "I wish it were," says Bernard Schwetz, head of FDA's science office. Congress is expected to consider changes at FDA this year that may target cuts in the agency's overall \$190 million research budget.

## House Science Chair Lays Out Strategy

The new chair of the House Science Committee, Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), pledged last week to work with Democrats, but he warned them that R&D spending will be shaped by the fate of a balanced budget amendment now being considered in Congress. Sensenbrenner warned that failure to pass that measure, which the White House

steadfastly opposes, could hurt discretionary programs like research in the long run.

Sensenbrenner also said in a statement that he would work more closely with the Senate to pass science-related authorization bills, which in recent years have languished from Senate inattention. And he pledged to root out fraud in R&D agencies.

The new chair named one of the few scientists in Congress—

physicist Vernon Ehlers (R-MI)—as his second in command. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) will chair the space and aeronautics subcommittee, and Ken Calvert (R-CA), a former real estate executive, will succeed Rohrabacher as chair of the energy and environment subcommittee. Steve Schiff (R-NM) and Constance Morella (R-MD) will remain chairs of the basic research and technology panels, respectively.

## The Orphan Earmark, Continued

A \$14 million windfall for breast cancer "action projects" that became a political hot potato last fall has now landed in the lap of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Donna Shalala. Breast cancer activists last week asked Shalala—for the second time—to turn aside the earmark in HHS's 1997 budget and spend the money on peer-reviewed research at the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Following this advice, however, might offend the creator of the earmark—Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA)—head of the panel that oversees HHS spending.

The Senate steered the money to the National Action Plan on Breast Cancer (NAPBC), which women's health activists helped establish in 1994. The head of HHS's office on women's health, Susan Blumenthal, supported the set-aside and proposed using it on cancer prevention. Normally, activists welcome a gift like this. But members of the NAPBC

steering panel—which includes former cancer patients—saw it as wasteful (*Science*, 1 November, p. 709). They voted to send the funds back to HHS for research last fall and again at a 10 February meeting, despite Shalala's mild efforts to dissuade them.

When Shalala met with the NAPBC panel, she asked members to "talk to me." Said physician Susan Love, who helped create NAPBC: "We never really wanted this to become another bureaucracy." And Mary Jo Kahn, a leader of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, said "it would be counterproductive" to fund a new grants program outside NCI.

Shalala said she told Specter she will "come up [to Capitol Hill] and talk" about what should be done, but she left the meeting without indicating what she will recommend. She suggested that the NAPBC might want to hold "a big meeting" and consider other options. The panel did not warm to that idea.