SCIENCESCOPE

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No ordinary ore. Rare Oklo uranium deposit in Gabon will soon be mined out, but scientists hope to save a nearby site.

Natural Fission Reactor Threatened by Mining

In the west African jungle lie pockets of rich uranium ore that 2 billion years ago burned like huge nuclear reactors. But the last known rare deposit of this type—considered a natural analog of a nuclear waste repository—is slated to be mined next fall, say scientists who are lobbying to save it.

The natural reactors were discovered in 1972 when scientists noticed that the ratio of the isotope uranium 235 (U-235) to U-238 in some ore samples from a Gabon mine in the Oklo area was surprisingly low. Studies revealed that the U-235 had been consumed by fission due to an unusual set of conditions, including the presence of water, which moderated the reaction.

A French-Gabonese company called COMUF soon plans to mine the last of the 14 Oklo reactors. But a team of European scientists who have been tracking radionuclides in the soil and water nearby are trying to save one site. Led by François Gauthier-Lafaye of the Centre de Géochimie de la Surface–CNRS in Strasbourg, the researchers hope to spare a small, undisturbed reactor at Bangombé, 30 kilometers from Oklo. To succeed, however, the scientists must persuade the French government to pay COMUF for the 150 to 200 tons of uranium there, worth about $3.5 million, Gauthier-Lafaye says.

For now, the French government plans to ask COMUF to delay mining the site, according to Bernard Bigot, director-general of research and technology in France's ministry of research and education. But the final decision will depend on a review of the reactor's scientific value, he says. Gauthier-Lafaye believes that "a little bit of pressure [from the] international science community" might also help. To comment, write to gauthier@illite.u-strasbg.fr.

Baltimore to Caltech

In a surprising move, the California Institute of Technology announced on 13 May that it has named Nobel Prize–winning virologist David Baltimore as its new president. "It's a great appointment for Caltech and a wonderful opportunity for Baltimore," says Stanford's Paul Berg, also a Nobelist. Baltimore returned to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1994 after battling with Rep. John Dingell (D–MI) over charges of scientific misconduct in his lab—which were later dismissed—and resigning as President of Rockefeller University. Baltimore will replace Caltech president Thomas Everhart this fall.

Russian Grants to Remain Duty Free

Russian scientists are celebrating victory over a proposed tax policy that might have doomed many research centers. Science chiefs earlier this month persuaded the government to revise a controversial plan to tax grants to researchers and institutions—a scheme that would have drained off $1.4 billion, more than half the 1997 science budget (*Science*, 7 March, p. 1411).

Instead, government leaders sent a new version of the tax code to the Duma, the lower house of parliament, preserving income-tax exemptions for all research grants, fellowships, and graduate stipends, including income from foreign organizations. The new law represents a triumph for Science Minister Vladimir Fortov, who spent the last 2 months arguing to convince budget officials of the necessity for such exemptions for research. "It was an extraordinary battle," says Deputy Science Minister Gennady Tereshenko.

In the end, a government commission revising the tax code also agreed to special treatment for any outfit that qualifies as a "research organization"—defined as an institution that spends more than 70% of its time on R&D. Research activities at such institutes would be exempt from property tax. However, institutes would still have to pay a tax of 0.1% of their land assets, which may bring about $50 million a year to the treasury.

The exemptions and concessions, if passed by the Duma and signed into law by President Boris Yeltsin, would remain in force until 1 January 1998. After that, a new commission will reassess whether individual research organizations qualify for the tax exemption.

Not surprisingly, science officials are loath to jump through more tax hoops less than 2 years from now. Says Tereshenko, "This will create lots of problems and conflicts."

Porter Battles Back Troubles

Representative John Porter (R–IL), a strong supporter of biomedical research funding, developed a back problem a month ago that could put him out of combat just as the 1998 bill funding the National Institutes of Health (NIH) comes before the House appropriations subcommittee that Porter chairs. "This is the kind of thing that can change policy outcomes in bizarre ways," says one Capitol Hill lobbyist.

According to Porter's press secretary, David Kohn, the congressman is suffering from acute pain caused by a protruding disk that's putting pressure on the sciatic nerve. Porter has been getting bed rest, although Kohn says he "insists on coming to the House floor in a wheelchair to cast votes" and is planning to chair some subcommittee meetings. But Porter has postponed several hearings already, including one on how NIH sets research priorities (*Science*, 18 April, p. 344). In the next few weeks, he may have to face surgery, says a subcommittee aide. It is too early to say what impact this will have on the NIH budget markup hearings in Porter's subcommittee, which were set to begin in early June.

Japan Seeks Balance in Global Bioscience Program

A meeting of the seven leading industrial countries (G7) in Washington, D.C., next week is expected to serve as a forum for Japan's concern about its lopsided financial support for an international research program that funds studies on molecular biology and the brain.

The Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP)—endorsed 10 years ago at a similar summit—has awarded grants to thousands of scientists around the world since it started in 1990 (*Science*, 13 December 1996, p. 1832). Although Japan pays 80% of the program's current $47 million budget, scientists from other countries receive most of the money. The United States, for example, gets back five times its $4 million contribution. "There is a tendency for other governments to see Japan's support as a small return on their trade imbalance with Japan," says Michel Cuenod, secretary-general of the Strasbourg, France–based program.

But Japanese officials, he says, "are growing impatient with continuing the program" if the funding issue is not addressed. The G7 meeting, he says, offers world leaders a chance to act on an unfulfilled promise made 5 years ago for parity in contributions.