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Safe at last? Brown tree frog in Brazil's threatened Atlantic forest, which will be protected by new law.

Brazilian Rain Forest to Gain Protection

The Brazilian legislature is close to passing the first national law explicitly protecting Brazil's Atlantic rain forest, a 95,000-square-kilometer natural area along the country's east coast—comparable to Madagascar in its richness of unique species, and considered equally endangered.

While less famous than the much larger Amazonian rain forest, the geographically isolated Atlantic rain forest has hundreds of plant and animal species found nowhere else in the world. For example, 17 of the 23 species and subspecies of primates living there are endemic, says primatologist Anthony Rylands of the University of Minas Gerais. "They're good indicators of biodiversity," he says. But logging and other development have destroyed more than 90% of the original habitat.

What's left would get more protection than ever before under a proposed law in the Chamber of Deputies that would promote regeneration and sustainable use, and criminalize illegal deforestation. The bill is a compromise, however, resulting from a bitter fight this fall in which environmentalists attacked industry-supported proposals to allow municipalities to control land-use decisions and to drop a requirement for environmental impact assessments. After a storm of editorials and letters in major newspapers, political leaders deleted these sections, according to biologist João Paulo Capobianco, head of the Social and Environmental Institute in São Paolo. The final draft legislation, he says, "is very good, better than the original." For example, older secondary forest now has the same status as old growth forest, a provision not in the original draft.

With the major battles over, Capobianco was "very optimistic" that the bill would pass a Chamber of Deputies vote as soon as this week. He also expects smooth sailing in the Senate and approval by the president.

Cancer Clinicians Lobby for Peer Panel

In what some clinical researchers might consider a minor miracle, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is warming to the notion of creating a clinical studies peer-review section—a group that judges the merit of grant proposals—in this case, for cancer research. For years, clinicians have pushed to get a peer-review panel dedicated to clinical research, arguing that most NIH study sections are biased in favor of bench science. But NIH chiefs have seen no need for a special clinical panel. Nor has a blue-ribbon panel advising NIH on clinical research that was to deliver its report this week (*Science*, 14 November, p. 1215).

Meanwhile, some heavyweight oncologists—including National Cancer Institute (NCI) director Rick Klausner—are aggressively lobbying for an independent panel. Klausner advocated a new study section for clinical research at two meetings this fall, and this idea received formal support last month in a report chaired by James Armitage of the University of Nebraska, Omaha, on how to improve NCI-funded clinical trials.

Klausner, Armitage, and David Livingston of the Dana-Farber Cancer Center in Boston—chair of NCI's board of scientific advisers—are all trying to persuade NIH to set up such a panel. Says Livingston: "There is very strong sentiment in the community for a dedicated instrument for clinical cancer research peer review."

Their request has been relayed to Elvera Ehrenfeld, director of NIH's Center for Scientific Review. She's made no promises, but plans to run pilot studies that, if successful, could lead to creating such a panel. These "experimental initiatives," she says, will be unveiled "before the end of the year."

President Cuts Ag Research 'Pork'

In his latest bid to kill pet projects funded by lawmakers in their districts (*Science*, 7 November, p. 1003), President Clinton has used the new line-item veto against some of the most notorious of these "earmarks"—those for agricultural research. Last month, Clinton sliced $1.9 million from five research projects in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 1998 funding bill not requested by the Administration.

The cuts include $250,000 for University of Alaska studies of dairy-cattle feeds—which the White House says are redundant—and $140,000 for hydroponic tomato technology at Ohio State University in Columbus, which "has been conducting such tomato research for 30 years without federal funding," notes a White House statement. Also vetoed was $50,000 for a plant genome database at Ohio State. The money is a fraction of $41 million worth of these "special grants" not awarded competitively. But "it's a start," says biochemist John Suttie of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, an advocate of peer-reviewed ag grants.

The president also shot down $1.5 million in building funds for two USDA labs in Mississippi and Utah. Although Congress can take steps to override the line-item veto when it returns in January, this fall it attempted to do so with only one bill, for military construction.

Biopatent Rules Get EU Council's Backing

Europe moved a step closer to adopting continent-wide rules for patenting biotech inventions last week. The European Union's (EU's) Council of Ministers backed a draft directive supported by the European Parliament that would allow patents on genes and genetically modified animals and plants, while banning techniques related to human germline manipulation or human cloning (*Science*, 25 July, p. 472). The decision marks the latest stage in an intensive 9-year battle between industry, which foresees economic and health advantages to a uniform biopatent policy, and a coalition of consumer, environmental, and religious groups, which object to many biotech patents on safety or ethical grounds.

In last week's vote on a common position, only the Dutch voted against, with Belgium and Italy abstaining. The Dutch warned of unpredictable dangers in transferring genes between species, while Ireland, Britain, and Belgium had some reservations about allowing patents on human gene sequences. "But we hope the pragmatic approach against such patents by industry and academia will continue," says John Gillott of Britain's charitable organization, the Genetic Interest Group.

Britain, with the largest biotech industry in Europe, argued that overall, the directive would merely harmonize existing varied patent law in Europe, adding that without it, pharmaceutical firms might move elsewhere. And industry finds the new plan "broadly acceptable," says Magdelene Azero of the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries Associations.

The draft directive now returns to the European Parliament, which initially rejected it before giving substantial support to a revised version last summer. But critics have not given up. "We shall continue to lobby" against it, says Ian Taylor of Greenpeace.