SCIENCESCOPE

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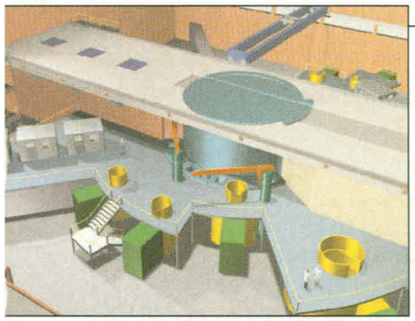

J. JORDAN/ORNL

Dream beam. Ion beam strikes mercury target in cylinder, scattering neutrons.

Cold Shower for Neutron Facility?

Will water drown out neutrons? The Administration may be gung-ho for the new $1.3 billion neutron facility to be built at Oak Ridge National Lab (ORNL) in Tennessee. But it is up against some stiff competition for funding from water projects, warned Pete Domenici (R–NM), chair of the Senate Budget Committee, last week. Domenici, speaking at a scientific symposium held in Washington, D.C., to build support for the proposed Spallation Neutron Source (SNS), said this may be a case where the Administration's "budget is not consistent with their sincerity."

The SNS would produce high-flux pulses of neutrons for research applications ranging from structural biology to materials science. Scientists want it badly (*Science*, 23 January, p. 470). But it's in the same funding bill as some politically popular water projects. The Administration wants to free up funds by throttling back on water projects, but Domenici—who chairs the subcommittee that handles the bill—seemed doubtful. "It's almost impossible to cut back on water projects when they are started," he said.

And there may be other obstacles. SNS supporter James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), chair of the House Science Committee, claims that the Administration put the SNS on shaky ground by selecting the Oak Ridge site without carrying out a full review. "That's going to be a problem for Congress," he says. Still, notes DOE energy research chief Martha Krebs, the accelerator-based SNS has bipartisan support, a relatively low price tag, and the enthusiastic endorsement of Vice President Al Gore. Just "don't relax," she counseled the assembled scientists.

Sequencers Endorse Immediate Data Access

What's right for humans is also right for microbes: A group of top genome researchers has agreed that everyone should follow the example set by those decoding the human genome and release sequence data right away rather than holding it until publication.

Two years ago, human genome researchers broke with tradition and agreed to release new data on an ongoing basis (*Science*, 25 October 1996, p. 533). At a meeting in Bermuda last month, staged by the U.K.'s Wellcome Trust, researchers from Japan, France, Britain, Germany, and the United States unanimously proposed that all large-scale sequencing centers follow suit. The participants first focused on mouse genome data, "but quickly wanted to broaden it" to organisms including microbes and plants, says Francis Collins, head of the National Human Genome Research Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. The scientists noted that the steady flow of human genome data has been a boon to research and has not cluttered up databases with incomplete information, as some had feared.

A formal statement of the policy is expected in a few weeks. But putting it into practice will require endorsement by government agencies in the five nations that currently support substantial genome sequencing. Practices vary—for example, the Wellcome Trust requires grantees to release pathogen sequences as they accumulate, but data from the bacterium *Bacillus subtilus*, financed mainly through the European Commission, was not put out promptly.

Other news from Bermuda: After comparing notes, researchers have concluded that chromosome 22 will become the first human chromosome to be completely sequenced, perhaps as early as fall.

Publishing Merger Aborted

The planned merger between two of the world's largest scientific publishers, Anglo-Dutch Reed Elsevier and its Dutch rival Wolters Kluwer, has been called off. In a terse 9 March statement, the companies said the conditions the European Union (EU) was likely to impose on the alliance would have "adverse implications" for their shareholders.

The announcement was cheered by those who feared that the merger would aggravate journal price increases that have been going on for more than a decade (*Science*, 28 November 1997, p. 1558). The two companies, with more than $6 billion in combined annual sales, would have dominated many areas of academic and professional publishing.

When they announced the merger last October, executives were confident that EU regulations would pose no major problem. But after taking a close look at the plans, EU competition commissioner Karel van Miert last month issued a strong "statement of objections" indicating that in order to be proper the publishers might have to sell off some holdings.

The cancellation came as a surprise—Van Miert had not yet delivered his final judgment, and both the publishers and their foes were due to present their cases at hearings in Brussels this week.

"This is a clear signal that there are limits to the price of scientific information," says Alex Klugkist, chair of the UKB, a group representing 15 Dutch scientific libraries that opposed the merger. But Elsevier's pricing policy, under fire for years, is unlikely to change anytime soon, says Klugkist. "It's not the end of the battle." In fact, an International Coalition of Library Consortia is to be formally established later this month, and one of its first tasks will be the creation of a set of "licensing principles" to govern members' negotiations on electronic journals.

Tricky Ethics of Tissue Samples

It's back to the drawing board for a panel that has been developing guidelines on how to protect the rights of people who donate blood, urine, or tissue for research. Last week the National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) vetoed a draft of a report by one of its subcommittees, saying that the group had not clearly explained its reasoning.

The report seemed like a "straightforward task," says commission member Thomas Murray, who directs the center for bioethics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. But, as it turned out, not only the subpanel but all 17 commission members "needed to think through ... the moral implications" of some proposed definitions and categories, says Murray. One of the most controversial proposals in the first draft—that approval be sought from an entire community for studies that might stigmatize the group—has been put off for discussion at NBAC's next meeting.

Some researchers who have been following NBAC's work on tissue-based research criticize its approach as meandering. "They're in a big muddle," says a government official who asked not to be named. "It's like a slow-moving soap opera: They're talking about the same things they were talking about in January 1997." In NBAC's defense, it did have to take time off last year to throw together its report calling for a moratorium on human cloning.

Murray says he hopes to have a revised draft ready for discussion at NBAC's next meeting, scheduled for May.