

Russia Removes Obstacles to Projects

Happy endings are rare in Russian science these days, but with his pen and his word Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin appears to have ended a pair of long-running battles that had imperiled major international projects in astrophysics and seismology. Last week, Chernomyrdin pledged that the Russian government would withdraw an earlier threat to sell 60 tons of gallium at the heart of a neutrino detector in southern Russia, and his science minister revealed that a new decree, signed by Chernomyrdin, will end customs snafus that have dogged a global seismic monitoring network.

The revelations added drama to the 10th meeting of the Russian-U.S. Commission on Economics and Technology, headed by U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Chernomyrdin. The Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission (GCC), as it's called, is meant to nurture and troubleshoot joint efforts in such areas as the international space station, nuclear disarmament, and disease surveillance, as well as showcase multimillion-dollar deals between U.S. and Russian companies. While the GCC meeting in Washington, D.C., last week featured some standard fare—including gripes about Russia's failure to keep the first space station component on track for a June launch—Chernomyrdin's commitment to preserve the two high-profile projects stole the show.

The first piece of good news came from Russian science minister Vladimir Fortov, who announced that a 5 March decree will settle a protracted dispute between Russian customs officials and scientists who run 12 seismological monitoring stations in Russia. The sites, some of which were set up in the late 1980s, are part of the Global Seismographic Network and are operated by the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), the U.S. Geological Survey, and Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology (IRIS), a nonprofit university consortium based in Washington, D.C. The Russian sites provide rapid data on earthquakes and for studies of Earth's deep interior and help monitor compliance with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty barring nuclear weapons tests.

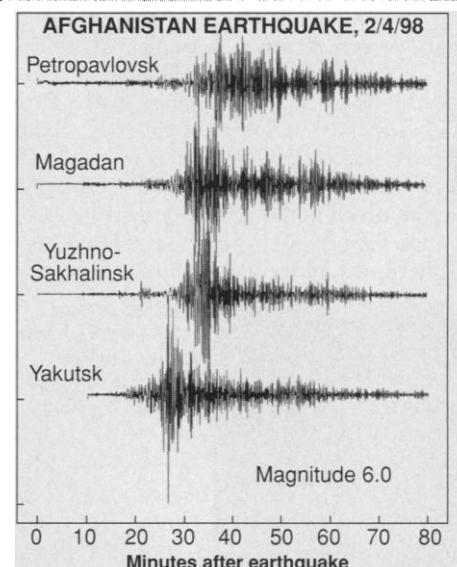
Trouble began soon after the Soviet Union fissioned in 1991, when Russia's fledgling customs bureau set out to collect duties on the country's mushrooming imports and exports. "The biggest problem," says IRIS President David Simpson, was that Russian customs began demanding retroactive duties on equipment already on Russian soil, even though it was exempt under Soviet-era agreements. And it would sometimes take 2 to 3 months to get data tapes through customs in the Russian Far East, he says,

diminishing the data's value.

According to Fortov, the decree—stamped confidential by the Russian government—orders the duty-free import of instruments and other materials needed for bilateral research projects, including the seismology network. U.S. officials, who had not seen the decree by the time *Science* went to press, are cautiously optimistic that the problem is solved; Fortov was expected to release more details at an 18 March press conference in Moscow.

Also willing to take a tentative sip of champagne are researchers affiliated with the Soviet-American Gallium Experiment (SAGE), a solar neutrino observatory in the Caucasus mountains that has been in operation since the mid-1980s. SAGE has been beset by troubles of late: Last year the Russian government threatened to sell—and thieves tried and failed to steal—the detector's ultrapure, liquid gallium, prompting 12 Nobel laureates to appeal to Chernomyrdin to save SAGE (*Science*, 19 December 1997, p. 2045).

Responding to a query at the GCC meeting from White House science adviser Jack Gibbons, Chernomyrdin stated unequivocally that the Russian government would not sell the gallium. "This is clearly good news" for



News travels faster. Decree should speed data from these seismic stations in the Far East.

neutrino physicists, Gibbons says. Now U.S. and Russian officials are hoping Chernomyrdin will issue a formal decree to change the gallium's status as a national reserve held for Russian industry to an RAS asset, says the Russian head of the SAGE collaboration, Vladimir Gavrin. Until that happens, Gavrin says, the gallium's "long-term future in science will not be assured."

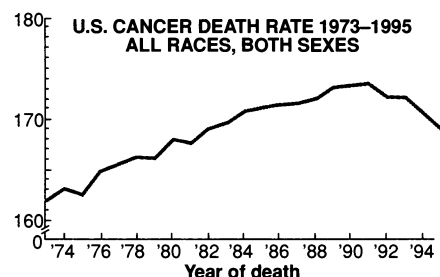
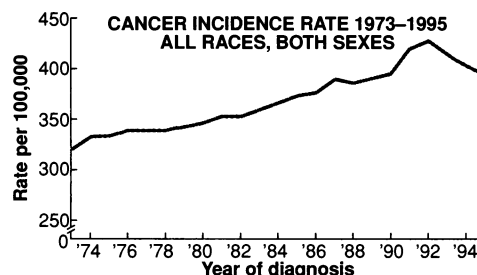
—Richard Stone

THE WAR ON CANCER

Cancer Warriors Claim a Victory

The news couldn't have come at a better time for cancer researchers: Just as Congress began working on the 1999 biomedical budget, a group of experts announced last week that the United States has "turned the corner in the war on cancer." That was the word from David Rosenthal, president of the American Cancer Society, as he and other public health

The average death rate for all types of cancer, which had been rising at 0.4% per year from 1973 to 1990, dropped 0.5% per year from 1990 to 1995. At the same time, the incidence of new cases (based on a sample of 9.5% of the population) began to recede. After climbing at an annual rate of 1.2% from 1973 to 1990, cancer incidence has been de-



SOURCE: NCI, BASED ON SEER/NCHS/CENSUS DATA

Turning point. New cancer cases (*left*) and deaths began to decline in 1992.

leaders released encouraging data at a press conference in Washington, D.C. According to their report (published in the 15 March issue of *Cancer*), a sea change occurred in 1992. In that year, cancer rates that had been rising steadily from the 1930s through the 1980s reversed and began to drift downward.

clining by 0.7% annually in recent years.

Many biostatisticians—including Harry Rosenberg of the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, Maryland, a co-author of the report—agree that one cancer is driving these overall trends: lung cancer. Aided by a long-term decline in stomach