



**DeNIEd.** New bureaucracy not needed for problems like this polluted river, says NSF board.

## Thumbs Down for Environment Institute

The National Science Foundation's governing body has shot down a proposal that NSF set up and fund a National Institute for the Environment (NIE). Although touted by many scientists as a way to plug gaps in environmental research, an NIE would "be duplicative" and therefore a waste of money, says the National Science Board (NSB).

Launching a new federally funded body to fund environmental research independent of regulatory agencies has long been a fond dream of the Committee for the NIE, organized 9 years ago by biologists Stephen

Hubbell of Princeton and Henry Howe of the University of Illinois, Chicago. Several bills to that effect have failed in Congress. Taking a new tack, boosters last year persuaded Congress to require NSF to report on a possible NIE by April.

But the NSF indicated last month in its draft report "reluctant[ce] to move in this direction," says chair Richard Zare, a chemist at Stanford. The board itself had doubts, and after much discussion, it last week issued a resolution saying an NIE would not only make for duplicative management but also "could isolate environmental research" from related studies.

Zare insists, however, that "we're not saying the status quo is fine." NSB "agrees" that more environmental research is needed, he says. And NSF could "enlarge its [leadership] role" through interagency groups such as the White House National Science and Technology Council. This course is "not the vision of the NIE in structure, but it is in goals," Zare says.

The Committee for the NIE disagrees. It cites widespread support for the NIE concept—including two recent letters signed by 211 university heads—and

said in a statement that it "sincerely hopes that the resolution does not reflect the final NSF report to Congress."

## Oak Ridge Safety Woes

Safety problems continue to bedevil Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. Forced to shut down its major research reactor in January (*Science*, 6 March, p. 1444) due to a series of mishaps, the lab was ordered last week to halt shipments of radioactive samples after two incidents drew the attention of the Department of Energy (DOE).

Earlier this month, a subcontractor to Lockheed Martin, which operates the lab, illegally shipped a radioactive sample by Federal Express. The recipient, Southwest Research Institute of San Antonio, Texas, notified authorities, and now DOE and the Federal Aviation Administration are conducting separate investigations, says Randy Walker, Oak Ridge manager of transportation and packaging. The subcontractor also sent a sample by private vehicle without proper documentation to a Tennessee lab, Walker adds. Lockheed Martin is reviewing its procedures and hopes to resume shipments soon.

## New Face for Indian Health Research

Indian biomedical research may be in for a shake-up with the appointment this month of a prominent immunologist as director of the bureaucracy-bogged Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

ICMR funds the bulk of the nation's biomedical research through two dozen council centers around the country and through extramural grants. But its budget has been static for most of this decade. Moreover, it has failed to stress India's most pressing health issues, such as blindness and malaria, says Subbiah Arunachalam, an information scientist at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai (formerly Madras), who has analyzed India's biomedical research publication record (*Science*, 1 August 1997, p. 643). The agency, he claims, is "plagued with a stifling bureaucracy and red tape."

The new director, Nirmal Kumar Ganguly of the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Research and Education at Chandigarh, says he plans to transform ICMR into an organization that "will be fast and quick in its responses to the needs of the researchers and the public." Ganguly, who gained national recognition as part of a committee that investigated a plague outbreak in 1994 in Surat, says he hopes to move the ICMR—last headed by a practitioner of traditional Ayurvedic medicine—toward funding more projects using molecular biology, genetic engineering, and other modern research tools. He also wants to substantially boost ICMR's \$17 million annual budget, in part by forging partnerships with drug companies.

Geneticist Appaji Rao of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore says ICMR for years has been led by nonscientists with little interest in modern medicine. In Ganguly, he says, "we fortunately have an academician who should give ICMR a perspective on modern techniques."

## Cancún, Paris ... or Space?

The day is fast approaching when thrillseekers hot for high G's, weightless nights, and an unobstructed view of the stars will be taking rockets to orbital hotels, according to a report released this week by the Space Transportation Association (STA), a private lobbying group in Springfield, Virginia.

The report, which received input from the aerospace industry as well as hotel and tourism groups, indicates that even at ticket prices of a half-million dollars, up to 1000 people a year will bite. "The market is enormous," says study author Ivan Bekey, former director of NASA's now-defunct office of advanced concepts. "There's no reason ordinary citizens can't go into space, enjoy the view, and float around."

Although the study was co-authored by NASA manager John Mankins, both STA and NASA agree that any civilian space bonanza should be left to the pri-



**Bon voyage.** "Space helicopter" in the works at Rotary Rocket Co. in Redwood Shores, California.

vate sector. "There are few subjects I've ever been near that are more controversial" than low-cost—and potentially high-risk—efforts to get the public into orbit, says Mankins. Still, he says, NASA could stand to gain from the endeavor if it sparks enthusiasm for the space program or leads to cheaper ways to climb out of Earth's gravity well.

Space tourism "will happen some day; the only question is when and at what cost," says John

Logsdon, director of the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. A couple of companies are already selling up-and-down trips by 2002 offering a view of Earth from 96 kilometers up, and the Russians have just started marketing visits to the Mir space station. The report asks the federal government to lay the legal groundwork for flights as it has done for the airline industry.