edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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Not out of the woods. Frog recovery plan found wanting.

Frog Alarm

Amphibian experts are hopping to the defense of a Utah frog population that they believe is going to suffer from a controversial wildlife policy introduced by Interior Department Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

Since 1992, Interior has encouraged states to craft conservation agreements on threatened species to avoid sanctions under the Endangered Species Act. Early last month Babbitt announced that the spotted frog, which probably numbers in the low thousands in bogs along Utah's Wasatch Front, would not be listed as endangered because state and U.S. wildlife officials had agreed on measures to help the frog bounce back. But herpetologists say, among other things, the Wasatch plan doesn't adequately estimate the frog's population trends and historical habitat and lacks a scientific basis for frog relocation plans. The problem, says herpetologist Jack Sites of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, is that the plan by the frog "recovery team" didn't include sufficient frog expertise. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Janet Mizzi says the agency is aware of the criticism and has recently sent the plan to three more outside experts for comment.

Nevertheless, three societies—the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles, the Herpetologists' League, and the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists—are drafting a letter asking Babbitt to reconsider. The herpetologists say the spotted frog is only one of many cases in which conservation plans have been drawn up with inadequate scientific input (*Science*, 19 December 1997, p. 2051). Some are good, says Sites, but if all were like this one, "we might as well not do the science."

RIKEN Chief Runs for Office

One of Japan's most prominent scientists has announced plans to quit his post and run for office. Physicist Akito Arima, president of the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research (RIKEN), will seek a seat in the upper house of the Diet, analogous to Britain's House of Lords, in July.

Arima has long been involved in shaping government policy. While president of the University of Tokyo from 1989 to 1993, he helped persuade lawmakers to raise science budgets by giving politicians and others tours of the university's decrepit facilities. Since moving to RIKEN in 1993, he has served on numerous government advisory panels.

But Arima's resignation came as "a real surprise," says Akiyoshi Wada, a biophysicist on the Science Council of Japan. Some scientists wonder if a move to the Diet could actually diminish his effectiveness in shaping science budgets. But, they note, he would be well positioned for a possible Cabinet science post.

A Leader for FDA

Cancer specialist Jane Henney has reportedly been selected to head the Food and Drug Administration, a post vacant since David Kessler left 14 months ago. Henney, vice president of the University of New Mexico, is expected to be nominated later this month, according to *The New York Times*.

AIDS Office Head Picked

Neal Nathanson, 71, an expert in viral epidemiology and vice dean for research at the University of Pennsylvania, has been named to head the Office of AIDS Research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He plans to meet this week with NIH top brass to discuss what can be done to speed up primate studies of a potential AIDS vaccine and get federal agencies to work "more collegially."

This will be Nathanson's first job at the epicenter of lobbying by national health groups. It's a challenging one calling for highly developed political as well as scientific skills but "I am confident that Neal will do it well," says Arnold Levine, the molecular biologist at Princeton University who oversaw a recent review of government-sponsored AIDS research. Nathanson says he hopes to operate "often behind the scenes, rather than from a bully pulpit" to get people working together. His first priority is to move potential vaccines in a "more systematic and orderly fashion" into primate testing. He also would like to push for early human trials of a candidate vaccine. Even if the product doesn't prove efficacious, "we may be able to learn a lot about how to run" such trials. He also thinks there's "room for improvement" in using behavioral science to prevent the spread of HIV.

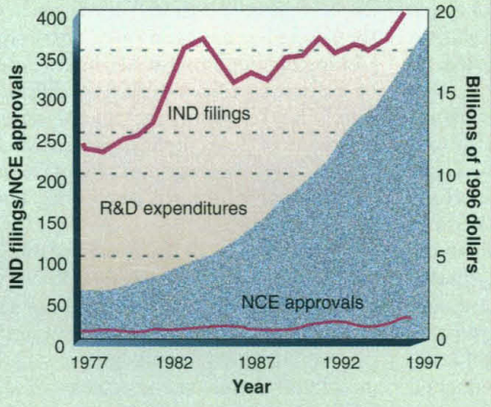
Nathanson adds that NIH chief Harold Varmus is a "very persuasive" recruiter: "He comes with his Nobel prize and asks, "What have you done for your country recently?'"

Drug Industry Faces Towering R&D Costs

Big pharmaceutical houses have been posting double-digit growth rates thanks to a graying population's demand for new medicines. But the industry's long-term health remains dicey: Research and development expenditures for new drugs continue to rise steeply, while the number of new drugs approved for clinical trials (INDs) and released on the market (NCEs) remains relatively flat (see chart).

"The increase in [new drug] approvals is not on pace to keep up with the large R&D expenditures," says Kenneth Kaitin, associate director of the Tufts University Center for the Study of Drug Development, who presented data last week at a pharmaceutical industry conference in Philadelphia. "This means that each approved drug ends up costing more." Kaitin says climbing R&D costs are largely due to rising outlays for clinical trials, the drive to get drug approval in many nations at once, and burgeoning costs of new assays for screening potentially therapeutic compounds.

The picture isn't likely to change anytime soon, says Enal Razvi, an analyst at Frost & Sullivan, a market research firm in Mountain View, California. "The easy diseases have all been targeted." What's more, the furiously competitive environment means that when a company gets a new drug approved, other firms will quickly cut into the market with related compounds.



The R&D burden means powerful pressure on companies for consolidation and mergers, notes Ravi. Indeed, the past 3 years have seen over $150 billion worth of mergers and acquisitions. And partnerships doubled in the '90s.