



Hepatitis B vaccine under fire

Turning a sphere inside out



Rep. Ehlers speaks out on science

ing it's Africa, Asia, and Turkey—these are basically trial balloons being floated.” The tracks of the great ape ancestry are still faint.

—ANN GIBBONS

## NOMINATIONS

### Clinton's R&D Chiefs Waiting on Sidelines

With the November congressional elections approaching, Senate Republicans are in no mood to rubber-stamp President Bill Clinton's choices for senior Administration posts. That was clear last week at a hearing on the nomination of U.N. envoy Bill Richardson to head the Department of Energy (DOE), as Republican senators blasted Clinton's handling of nuclear waste, the nuclear stockpile, and global climate change issues.

Richardson is the latest high-level Administration R&D nominee being held hostage to partisan wrangling between Congress and the White House over issues not related to their qualifications for the job. Science advocates worry that the delays could jeopardize R&D programs as the Administration begins work on the 2000 budget.

Perhaps the most frustrated of the science officials-in-waiting is one who has already been confirmed: microbiologist Rita Colwell, who was approved on 22 May as director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). The problem is that her predecessor, Neal Lane, is still awaiting confirmation as director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and, thus, has not officially vacated his NSF post. Neither appointment is controversial; Lane won plaudits from Republican and Democratic senators at his confirmation hearing, and lawmakers dispensed with a hearing for Colwell altogether. Rather, the delays are due both to White House tardiness in completing paperwork and to an election-year reluctance by Republicans to help Clinton rebuild his team.

The partisanship was on display last week during a 4-hour grilling of Richardson, a former Democratic member of

Congress from New Mexico, by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. The sternest words came from Senator Larry Craig (R-ID), who warned that he is prepared to oppose Richardson's confirmation until the White House lays out a clear plan to store spent nuclear fuel from commercial reactors. Under Senate rules, the objections of a single senator can delay a floor vote once the committee acts.

DOE is legally bound to store the waste, but the long-term storage facility at Yucca Mountain in Nevada will not be ready until well into the next century. Some lawmakers want an interim facility, but the White House opposes this option because it could divert money and attention from the long-term solution. Craig complained that the White House has not allowed previous energy secretaries to negotiate an interim plan with Congress. But Richardson, who insisted that decisions about nuclear waste disposal “will be based on science and not politics,” reminded legislators that “I can't deal with these issues until you confirm me.”

Republican lawmakers also questioned the Administration's efforts aimed at ameliorating global climate change despite stiff congressional opposition to the Kyoto treaty negotiated last December and blasted its oil and gas policies, which they maintain are hurting domestic producers. And some, such as Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), argued that the department should be abolished, although the idea has garnered little real political support in either the House or Senate.

At the same time, many senators said that holding up the confirmation would be counterproductive. “DOE needs a leader, a Cabinet officer, as quickly as possible,” said Senator Pete

Domenici (R-NM), who chairs the panel that appropriates DOE funding. Former DOE secretary Federico Peña left last month to join Vestar Capital Partners, a New York investment firm, leaving Deputy Secretary Betsy Moler as acting chief. Moler is expected to resign once a new secretary is confirmed; Administration officials say a leading candidate to succeed her is T. J. Glauthier, who now

oversees energy, space, and science issues at the Office of Management and Budget.

Administration officials hope all of the R&D nominees will be confirmed before Congress leaves in early August for a month-long recess. That would let them play a role in developing agency requests for the 2000 budget, which are submitted in the fall. Science advocates fear that the absence of senior officials like Richardson and Lane could hurt R&D programs. But given the Senate's backlog of some 140 nominees, a stack of other pressing business, and continuing partisan tensions, the would-be R&D chiefs may be forced to cool their heels for a while longer.

—ANDREW LAWLER

## ECOLOGY

### U.S., Ukraine Launch New Chernobyl Lab

Every summer for the past 6 years, U.S. ecologist Ron Chesser dons his moonsuit and respirator and prowls the marshes near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The site is not on any travel agent's list of popular destinations, but it does offer Chesser exactly what he wants—a supply of voles, striped field mice, and other small mammals that are markers for the ecological health of a region 12 years after the world's worst nuclear accident. At the end of every field season, however, Chesser must leave behind certain samples, such as highly radioactive biological tissue or soil, that cannot be taken out of the country and transported to his lab at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory in Aiken, South Carolina. “It's been pretty limiting,” he admits.

But things are about to get a bit easier for Chesser and other researchers who venture into Chernobyl's forbidden zone. Last week, Vice President Al Gore and Ukraine President Leonid Kuchma unveiled plans for an International Radioecology Laboratory at Chernobyl, funded jointly by the U.S. and Ukrainian governments. The lab, which will study everything from genetic mutations in local wildlife to radionuclide movement and cleanup technologies, should be up and running by next summer. “We place great hopes in this new facility,” says Anatoly Nosovsky, director of the Slavutych Laboratory of International Research and Technology, a nearby research center devoted to nuclear safety and cleanup technologies.

When the Chernobyl power plant's reactor number 4 exploded on 26 April 1986, it



**Holdup?** The U.S. Senate may delay its approval of Bill Richardson as secretary of energy.

DOUG MILLS/AP