



JOHN GERLACH/ANIMALS

Quieting down? New law could mute attempts to block telescope slated for red squirrel's home.

Green Light for Mount Graham Telescope?

Astronomers may soon be able to build an \$80 million telescope on a controversial site on Mount Graham in southern Arizona, thanks to a few words buried in last week's budget deal (see p. 640).

The language attempts to end a 12-year battle between environmental activists and the University of Arizona over the mountain, which is home to the endangered Mount Graham red squirrel. In 1988 Congress exempted three sites from required environmental impact studies, and two telescopes have since been built. But Arizona's decision to move the proposed Large Binocular Telescope from an approved site to a location less harmful to squirrel habitat triggered a suit by activists, who argued that the 1988 exemption didn't apply to the new site. A decision by a lower court to block construction was later upheld by a federal appeals court (*Science*, 5 May 1995, p. 630), which prompted the new legislation.

The budget bill says the alter-

native site is "authorized and approved" and "consistent with, and permissible under" the 1988 law. Peter Strittmatter, director of Steward Observatory at Arizona, says the university will ask that the injunction be lifted "very soon." If successful, Arizona and several U.S. and European partners would begin preparing the telescope site as soon as possible.

But John Fitzgerald, an attorney in Washington, D.C., for the Mount Graham Coalition, says his group will challenge whether the narrowly worded act does, indeed, "get [Arizona] off the hook." And there is new evidence of the squirrel's fragility: Forest fires sweeping across Mount Graham earlier this week have destroyed parts of its limited habitat.

Senators Skeptical of International Projects

While Department of Energy (DOE) managers are busy laying plans for U.S. participation in a host of large international science projects, enthusiasm is lagging in the Senate.

At a hearing last week held by the Energy and Natural Resource Committee's energy R&D subcommittee, Senator Bennett Johnston (D-LA) said he was "highly skeptical of spending \$450 million on a foreign machine," referring to U.S. plans to

take part in the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN in Geneva (*Science*, 5 April, p. 25). Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), who chairs the subcommittee, also expressed doubts, asking DOE to provide detailed data comparing the LHC's capabilities with those of the late Superconducting Super Collider.

U.S. involvement in the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) also came under scrutiny. Johnston said DOE can hardly afford a large share of the multibillion-

dollar fusion project. "We ought to make our minds up on ITER," he said. "It may well be worthwhile doing, but I haven't been able to get the president interested."

Martha Krebs, DOE's energy research chief, said the Administration supports participation in ITER: "The U.S. ought to be there," she declared. But she assured the senators that the United States would likely be "a very minor partner" in the project, spending about \$50 million a year.

Is the End Near for Smallpox Stocks?

Public health authorities have been poised for 3 years to obliterate variola—the smallpox virus—from the face of the planet. Twice leaders of the World Health Organization (WHO) have set an execution date for the virus, which now lives only in airtight research labs, and twice they've backed off. Later this month, WHO is expected to discuss another "final" deadline of June 1999, but in the meantime some of its scientific advisers are arguing for a speedier death.

The objection comes from six WHO infectious-disease experts led by Frank Fenner of Australia. In March they circulated a public letter to WHO urging destruction of smallpox stocks by June 1996. Fenner had chaired a WHO advisory panel in the early 1990s that concluded there was no need to keep stocks for research and that the stocks should be destroyed by December 1993. But a few scientists argued for a delay, and the death sentence was put off to June 1995. WHO's executive board then let the deadline slip again because it found "no consensus" for going forward (*Science*, 27 January 1995, p. 450).

Public health officials have been vague about the reasons for previous delays. But Donald A. Henderson, former adviser to the U.S. Public Health Service and a leader in smallpox eradication, says British military officials have been "the key" proponents of retaining stocks. Military scientists, Henderson says, suspect that Russians or terrorist groups may be hiding secret stocks, so they are reluctant to let go of their own. But Henderson sees no advantage in using smallpox as a weapon and no need to conduct further defensive research; he was one of those who signed Fenner's letter supporting immediate destruction of stocks. Henderson says the Australian delegation to WHO will offer Fenner's proposal as an alternative to the 1999 deadline at the WHO meeting this month.

U.K. Revisits Plan for Genetics Oversight Panel

After rejecting a parliamentary committee's advice to establish a national panel with broad oversight of human genetics, the British government now seems to be reconsidering the idea, which is expected to be debated by Parliament later this year.

The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee was "profoundly disappointed" by the government's response in January to its report of last summer (*Science*, 21 July 1995, p. 291) calling for an independent, mainly lay body to regulate gene therapies and screening and offer advice on ethical and legal aspects of genetics. Prime Minister John Major's cabinet rejected that suggestion, agreeing instead to establish an "Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing."

The Select Committee, however, felt such an ad-

visory group would not have sufficient independence or a wide enough purview, and that it wouldn't provide a focal point for public concerns. So in February and March, the committee took the unusual step of questioning government science and health ministers and advisers about their reasoning. During these sessions, Stephen Dorrell, Secretary of State for Health, indicated he hasn't abandoned the idea of a body with a broader charge and a "cross-departmental view" of the broad implications of genetics.

Last week, the Select Committee called for a House debate "on the way in which such a commission would operate." "The government realizes there's a lot of interest in this," says Anne Campbell of the committee, although she suspects it would still oppose giving such a panel regulatory powers.