

## Senate holds up the appointment of US science policy chief

[WASHINGTON] Senate confirmation of the appointment of Neal Lane, the director of the National Science Foundation (NSF), as head of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in the White House could be delayed until next year because of a growing rift between the Senate and the Clinton administration.

Senator Trent Lott (Republican, Mississippi), majority leader in the Senate, said last week that all administration nominations for posts at the White House and at certain other agencies would be denied until the administration cooperated more fully with his investigation into the alleged technology transfer risk of allowing Chinese rockets to launch US satellites. Lott has also said that all nominations will be blocked until after November's Congressional elections unless the administration cooperates with Republican legislation plans.

Rita Colwell, the University of Maryland marine biologist whose nomination to succeed Lane has already been confirmed, does not plan to take over at NSF until Lane moves on.

## Japan will help China to clean up power stations

[LONDON] Japan's government is to help reduce industrial pollution in China by providing 1,000 Chinese coal-fired power plants with equipment that will help reduce sulphur emissions.

Officials at Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) say the decade-long assistance will contribute significantly to pollution control. Three-quarters of China's energy comes from coal. The equipment will be paid for through a combination of loans and official development assistance. MITI will present its plan to China's president Jiang Zemin during his visit to Japan in September.

## Euro parliament seeks ban on embryo research

[PARIS] The European Parliament has called for a ban on European Union research involving human embryos. In an amendment to the proposal for the fifth Framework research programme, the parliament calls for existing bans on funding for research on germline gene therapy and human cloning to be extended to include a ban on all research that results in the destruction of human embryos.

Until now, the European Union has avoided this thorny issue, as individual

member states have varying policies reflecting their cultural traditions. The Framework programme is currently the subject of negotiations between the parliament and the European Commission. Meanwhile, the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, which advises EU institutions on ethical matters, has been asked to give its opinion on the ethics of research on human embryos.

## Climate change research wins \$2m in California

[LONDON] The Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI), an organization funded by the US energy industry and based in California, has been given a \$2.2 million award to assess the impact of global climate change in its home state. The award was made by the California state Energy Commission. An EPRI statement said that the organization and its research partners already plan to spend \$30 million on climate change research over the next two years.

## UK eyes nuclear power for greenhouse cuts

[LONDON] Britain's Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering have launched a study to assess the potential contribution of nuclear energy in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The study will be conducted by a 10-member group of experts drawn from industry and the academic community. The group will be chaired by Sir Eric Ash, former rector of Imperial College London, and treasurer of the Royal Society. Its final report will appear next year.

## Clinton threatens to veto House funding bill for NIH

[WASHINGTON] President Bill Clinton last week said he will veto a 1999 spending bill passed by the House Appropriations Committee that contains a 9.1 per cent increase for the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The bill, which funds the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, was passed on 14 July on a party-line committee vote. It would boost the NIH budget by \$1.24 billion, to \$14.86 billion. But it contains \$2 billion in cuts to social and education programmes to which the president objects strongly (see *Nature* 394, 108; 1998).

Clinton said in a statement that if he receives the bill in its current form he would have no choice but to veto it.

The Senate has yet to write a corresponding bill. Once it does, the two versions must be reconciled and passed into law by 1 October, the start of the fiscal year.

## Manslaughter charges in French blood scandal

[PARIS] France's long-running scandal over contaminated blood took a dramatic turn this week when the commission of investigation of the Court of Justice of the Republic rejected a plea by the French attorney general to drop all charges against three former ministers. The ministers stand charged in connection with their responsibilities in introducing measures to prevent transmission of HIV in blood supplies in the early 1980s.

Instead, the commission sent Laurent Fabius, a former socialist prime minister, and Edmond Hervé and Georgina Dufoix — at the time secretary of state for health, and minister of social affairs, respectively — before the Court of Justice of the Republic on charges of "manslaughter" and "involuntary harm to the integrity of persons".

The charges replace an earlier one of "collusion in poisoning". This was considered by the Supreme Court of Appeals to be inappropriate on the grounds that guilt of this nature required demonstrating a deliberate intention to kill.

## Pakistan may sign up to nuclear test ban treaty

[LONDON] Pakistan has taken a small step towards signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by announcing that any decision would be taken regardless of whether India signed. In the past, Pakistan has made its signature of the treaty conditional on India signing first.

Reports from Islamabad suggest that Pakistan may be prepared to sign the treaty, but will wait for the Indian response before ratifying it. Reports from New Delhi suggest that India may be prepared to sign if it is given nuclear weapons status, and a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

## Mathematician drowns attempting record swim



[LONDON] Sir James Lighthill (left), the former Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at the University of Cambridge, died last week attempting to repeat a previous feat: swimming around the

English Channel Island of Sark. He was 74. Lighthill was the first man to perform the nine-hour, nine-mile swim in 1973, at the age of 49.

An authority on fluid dynamics, Lighthill was a former director of the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough.