

UK reaffirms commitment to independent food agency

[LONDON] The UK ministry of agriculture, fisheries and food (MAFF) has strenuously denied suggestions that it is seeking to retain influence over a planned independent food standards agency. The agency has been proposed by the government in a bid to increase the separation between policy on food safety and agricultural interests, in the wake of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis.

Erik Millstone, a researcher at the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex, who is one of Britain's leading food policy experts, last week said that he was concerned that MAFF appeared to be closely involved in deciding the final structure of the agency. He also voiced fears that "main positions" in the agency might be staffed with officials holding comparable posts within MAFF. Consumer organizations have also suggested that parts of MAFF are uneasy at the prospect of losing responsibility for food safety and are keen for the ministry to retain oversight of the new agency.

But a senior MAFF official rejects these suggestions. Millstone's comments, he claims, represented a misunderstanding of some recent changes within MAFF.

One such change has been MAFF's decision to enlarge its food safety group by bringing together civil servants involved in different aspects of food standards from both MAFF and the department of health. But the official insists that this is an "interim arrangement" to improve the government's manage-



Jack Cunningham: no hijacker...

ment of food safety "not a pre-emptive strike" to influence the structure of the food agency.

He says that Jack Cunningham, the secretary of state for agriculture, is committed to "changing the culture of the ministry, and moving in a new direction", and that the food standards agency will be set up after an exhaustive public consultation. "Ministers are committed to an independent agency", he says, "There is no way that MAFF is trying to hijack the process."

An independent food agency was proposed in a report by Philip James, director of the Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen, Scotland, commissioned by the Labour party shortly before the May general elections, as part of its proposals to rectify the loss of confidence in British food policy.

The document envisages that the agency would need to employ experienced civil servants from government departments, such as MAFF. But it adds that such staff would need to "acquire rapidly a culture where public health and consumer interests clearly dominate whilst proper account is taken of economic and business interests".

MAFF believes this is a sensible recommendation. But Millstone says there needs to be a break with the past.

Ehsan Masood

Australia plans new research reactor but no reprocessing

[SYDNEY] The Australian government has approved the construction of a A\$300 million (US\$220 million) research reactor. It will replace the country's only nuclear reactor, which was built in 1958 at Lucas Heights near Sydney. But at the same time, a proposal from the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) to build a reprocessing facility was rejected. Instead, the government has decided to send spent fuel to reprocessing plants at Dounreay in Scotland and Savannah River in the United States.

Peter McGauran, the science and technology minister, said that the reactor is needed to ensure self-sufficiency in medical radioisotopes, as well as providing materials testing facilities. The existing reactor is nearing the end of its operational life and will be decommissioned in 2005.

The decision has been welcomed by major science bodies, who argue that it is essential for developing national capacities in nuclear science. But some scientists see it as mainly a production facility and urge that a range of neutron sources and guide halls for research should be included.

John White, director of the Research School of Chemistry at the Australian National University and policy secretary for the Australian Academy of Science, says the new reactor "should be a first-class facility by international standards and operated as a national facility available to all qualified researchers".

The new light-enriched 14–20 megawatt uranium reactor will be operated by ANSTO at the Lucas Heights site. The local shire council and environmental organizations such as Greenpeace have long protested on safety grounds. They say no new reactor should be constructed near residential areas and argue that medical isotopes could instead be imported. More remote sites were rejected on grounds of cost and poorer access to airports.

Martyn Evans, the opposition Labor Party's science spokesman, has called for "a proper public inquiry", and argued that "alternative uses of the scarce public funds available for science should have been considered".

Helen Garnett, executive director of ANSTO, argues that self-sufficiency and reliability of local supplies of isotopes are vital and that isotopes with particularly short half-lives cannot be imported. She claims that the reactor will also become a regional centre, providing competencies to underpin the nuclear technology emerging in Asia.

Peter Pockley

DNA fingerprinting evidence questioned

[NEW DELHI] The conviction of a suspected rapist in an Indian court has sparked controversy over the quality of DNA fingerprinting evidence used in the case.

The defendant, a politically influential Swami Premananda (a spiritual head of a Hindu sect), was arrested on charges of rape and murder. The investigation heard evidence from several alleged victims, but hoped to clinch the case by showing that the defendant was the father of an aborted fetus conceived by a girl who claimed to have been raped by him.

DNA fingerprinting carried out at the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) in Hyderabad on tissue from the girl's fetus, and on both her and the swami's blood, concluded that the swami and the alleged rape victim were the biological parents of the fetus. But similar tests carried out by the University Diagnostics Limited, at the request of the defendant, gave

negative results. Despite these discrepancies, the district court in Pudukkottai (Tamilnadu state) was apparently swayed by CCMB's findings and sentenced the accused to life imprisonment.

Wilson J. Wall, a consultant geneticist at University Diagnostics, says he is "not surprised" that the results were different. Wall questions the validity of the techniques used by the Indian laboratory, and their interpretation. Wall claims that the procedures fell short of the accepted procedures for establishing matches used in both the United States and Europe.

He says that in his view "their PCR [polymerase chain reaction] analysis would have been thrown out of a British court." Lalji Singh, head of CCMB's Centre for DNA Fingerprinting and Diagnostics, denies the allegations, and claims that the centre's analyses were carried out according to established procedures.

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