

German policy paper 'focuses on economic returns from space'

[MUNICH] Germany's research minister, Jürgen Rüttgers, is reported to have prepared a policy document, due to be presented to the German government this month, setting out ways in which federal funding of space research might be focused more tightly on projects that promise an economic return. The proposal includes the merger of the German Space Agency (DARA) with the national air and space research centre (DLR).

According to the newspaper *Handelsblatt*, the policy document criticizes the German space industry for failing to exploit technology such as telecommunications satellites, and for an excessive focus on building "innovating prototypes and other unique systems".

Rüttgers also claims that "substantial deficits" exist in the activities of the European Space Agency. Rüttgers says that the agency's management costs are too high, and that Germany should be allowed a greater role in its decision-making process, in line with the size of its financial contribution. But Rüttgers is also said to have confirmed that participation in the international space station should remain at the heart of Germany's space activities.

Risk panel recommends better communication

[WASHINGTON] US government agencies were recommended last week to adopt more sophisticated methods for estimating and communicating health and environmental risks. The 10-member Commission on Risk Assessment and Risk Management, jointly appointed in 1994 by Congress, President Bill Clinton and the National Academy of Sciences, encouraged regulators to include multiple factors in their risk assessments, rather than focusing on individual chemicals or single environmental media. The panel also favoured consensual regulatory action over increased judicial review, and said that economic analysis, while useful, should not be the "sole or overriding determinant" of regulatory decisions. The commission's report can be found on the World Wide Web at www.riskworld.com.

Nuclear waste expert criticizes Nirex

[LONDON] Sir John Knill, a former chairman of the UK government's Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, has criticized the waste disposal company Nirex for refusing to acknowledge reservations about the adequacy of its data at Sellafield in Cumbria, in northwest England, the

proposed site for a nuclear waste repository.

In a letter to John Gummer, the UK environment secretary, Knill wrote that during discussions with the committee the company had "consistently denied" having reservations over its safety assessment programme, as well as the existence of differences between hydrogeologists advising Nirex and the company's own modellers. The letter appears to have been prompted by the leaking of an internal memorandum written by Nirex's director of science, voicing concern at the lack of datapoints at the Sellafield site (see *Nature* 385, 282; 1997).

Parents file lawsuit over *E. coli* death in Japan

[TOKYO] The parents of a 12-year-old girl who died last August after eating a school lunch infected with a highly toxic strain of *Escherichia coli* have filed a lawsuit against their local government near Osaka in Japan claiming negligence and demanding ¥78 million (\$680,000) in compensation. This is the first of several lawsuits expected to be filed by the families of victims of last summer's *E. coli* infection which affected about 10,000 people, most of them schoolchildren.

The suit claims that the Sakai municipal government could have foreseen the danger

To **save an hour**
each time you
purify histidine-
tagged proteins,
put it on the
tip of a syringe

