

## Congress threatens ITER over cost to US fusion labs

**Washington** History is threatening to repeat itself as members of the US Congress chafe at the country's participation in an international fusion experiment.

The United States pulled out of the ITER project in 1998 after Congress expressed frustration over its high price. George W. Bush's administration opted to re-enter the collaboration in 2002 (see *Nature* 421, 563; 2002). But at public hearings on 15 March, members of Congress expressed concern about the project, which has been deadlocked over the choice of site since 2003.

Bush's 2006 budget proposal allots \$50 million to ITER, but reduces domestic fusion funding by some \$34 million. "I feel that everyone is bowing to ITER," says Rodney Frelinghuysen, Republican representative for New Jersey. "It doesn't make me happy."

Senator Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico) also has reservations about the project. The appropriations subcommittee has been "very clear in its opposition to funding ITER out of the fusion account", he said in a statement last week. Stephen Dean, who heads a fusion lobby group in Washington, says that funding ITER at such expense to domestic programmes "is just not acceptable to the fusion community".

## Farm-scale trials reveal effects of transgenic crops

**London** The final results from the largest investigation so far into the ecological impact of genetically modified crops have revealed a subtle impact on biodiversity.

Data from the four-year Farm Scale Evaluations, commissioned by the UK government and carried out in Britain, show that the herbicide spraying regime associated with transgenic winter oilseed rape favours grassy weeds at the expense of broad-leaf rivals.

Researchers led by David Bohan of Rothamsted Research in Harpenden reported on 21 March that the decrease in broad-leaf weeds might adversely affect

## Change of head lifts gloom at primate centre

**Durham** Researchers at the Duke University Primate Center in Durham, North Carolina, are hoping that the appointment of a director will give the centre a new lease of life. Anne Yoder, a biologist at Yale University who got her PhD at Duke University, will take over the running of the centre in August.

The centre, which combines research and conservation missions, is well known for its collection of endangered prosimians, such as lemurs. But two years ago its future was threatened when university administrators considered withdrawing their commitment to the facility (see *Nature* 423, 471; 2003).



The 16 March announcement to hire Yoder — along with a commitment to spend \$7 million expanding and restructuring the centre to capitalize on evolutionary genomic opportunities — seems to signal a brighter future for the facility.

insects and birds that rely on such weeds and their seeds. But the overall effect on wildlife is less pronounced than that previously indicated for spring oilseed rape and beet (see *Nature* 425, 751; 2003).

## Panel holds the key to prison research rules

**Washington** The Institute of Medicine (IOM), which advises the US government on biomedical issues, is casting a critical eye on the rules controlling research on prisoners.

The regulations were put in place by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in 1976, and define tricky concepts such as informed and voluntary consent. But researchers now say the rules are difficult to follow and implement. In addition, the number of inmates in jails and juvenile detention facilities has risen from 200,000 to more than 2 million since the 1970s.

The DHHS has now asked the institute to reconsider the ethical bases for protecting prisoners involved in research. An IOM committee, led by public-health lawyer Lawrence Gostin of Georgetown University in Washington, will address such questions as how the term 'prisoner' should be defined, whether it is possible to ensure informed and voluntary consent in prisons, and whether research on prisoners should only be done if it benefits prisoners — as is currently the case.

## Environmentalists aim to foil Swiss plan to wrap glaciers

**Munich** When the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the Berlin Reichstag in fabric ten years ago, the project catapulted them to stardom. A Swiss company has now said it wants to wrap an alpine glacier in PVC foil this summer. But far from being seen as high art, the plan — intended to stop

the glacier from melting — has triggered protests from environmentalists.

Climate warming is causing the Gurschen glacier, near the Swiss ski resort of Andermatt, to shrink. In a bid to slow the melting, researchers will in May cover part of the glacier with a material that reflects sunlight. If the test is successful, the use of the foil covering may be extended next year, says Carlo Danioth, head of piste services at the Andermatt funicular.

But Swiss environmentalists complain that the project will be an eyesore. Wrapping the glacier to stop it melting is an "absurd idea", says a climate expert at Greenpeace in Switzerland.

## Congress to consider ban on human cloning

**Washington** In what has become an annual tradition in the US Senate, lawmakers have introduced legislation to ban human cloning for both reproductive and research purposes.

On 17 March, Sam Brownback (Republican, Kansas) in the Senate and Dave Weldon (Republican, Florida) in the House of Representatives introduced bills banning all forms of cloning. The bills would have to be passed by both houses of Congress, and be signed by President George Bush, before becoming law.

Members of the House who support therapeutic cloning — in which the cloned embryo is used to make cells either for research or transplantation — have already introduced a bill that would permit this but ban reproductive cloning. Senators are now expected to do the same, although in previous years neither side has garnered enough votes to pass legislation on therapeutic cloning. Brownback's supporters hope that Republican gains in the November 2004 elections will now tip the vote in his favour.

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On trial: studies of oilseed rape have shown that transgenic crops can affect biodiversity.