

Brazil's biosecurity law faces legal challenge

Brazil's rosy future as a biotechnology haven is in doubt after claims that a biosecurity law contravenes the country's constitution. Claudio Fonteles, the attorney-general, has asked Brazil's Supreme Court to consider whether the four-month-old law is unconstitutional (see *Nature* 434, 128; 2005). The law legalized research using human embryonic stem cells and established a system for the approval of genetically modified crops.

On 21 June, Fonteles challenged a section of the law that assigns the decision about whether a genetically modified organism is environmentally safe to a special committee attached to the science ministry, and not to federal and local governments.

Fonteles also argued that the section of the law that legalizes stem-cell research is unconstitutional, as the constitution protects the right to life. He mustered the support of more than half a dozen scientists.

Fonteles is expected to leave office this week. But his successor, Antonio Fernando Souza, will almost certainly support the legal challenges.



In the front line: Tamiflu would be the drug of choice in the event of an avian flu pandemic.

Flu drug's inventor acts to regain control from Roche

Companies are sparring over rights to the drug that is seen as the best hope for treating human cases in an avian flu pandemic.

Oseltamivir, branded as Tamiflu, is currently marketed by Swiss firm Roche. But last week the drug's inventor, Gilead Sciences, based in Foster City, California, said it wanted to end a 1996 agreement that gave Roche exclusive marketing rights. It accused Roche of failing to promote the drug sufficiently and of underpaying royalties. If the companies fail to agree a settlement within 90 days, the dispute will go to arbitration, which could take 18 months.

Public health experts say they do not expect the dispute to distract governments' short-term plans to stockpile the drug.

Germany ends impasse over university funding

Ending an 18-month political deadlock, the German government last week finally approved a €1.9-billion (US\$2.3-billion) programme for strengthening university research. Under a deal agreed with Germany's 16 state governments, the country's main research agencies, including the Max Planck Society, are also guaranteed annual budget increases of 3% until 2010.

Plans to create a number of elite universities had been first announced in January 2004. But the plan was threatened by disagreement between some states and the federal government over who was responsible for science and education (see *Nature* 433, 448; 2005).

Under the revised programme, which runs from 2006 to 2011, competition for creating ten elite universities will be supported with €13.5 million per year. But the bulk of the €1.9 billion is earmarked for the creation of 30 'clusters' involving several universities. A total of €40 million

per year will be spent on postgraduate programmes.

Speaking at the Max Planck Society's annual assembly in Rostock last week, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder promised to make science a high priority if he wins the election in the autumn. He said he would make an extra €15 billion available for science and education by 2010.

Japan targets more whales despite losing key votes

Conservationists won a hollow victory last week in Ulsan, South Korea, at the International Whaling Commission's annual meeting.

Japan failed in its bid to overturn a moratorium on commercial whaling, and was outvoted on several other initiatives, such as starting limited coastal whaling along Japanese shores and abolishing an Antarctic whale sanctuary. It also lost a vote to expand its 'research' whaling programme by doubling its take of minke whales and starting to take fin and humpback whales.

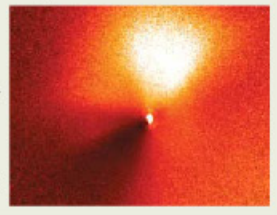
But the last vote has little more than political significance, as Japanese delegates told *Nature* that they will go ahead with their plan to increase the whale take anyway.

Hubble captures comet's dusty outburst

Comet Tempel 1 spits out a jet of dust in this image snapped by the Hubble Space Telescope on 14 June.

The comet's 7-kilometre-wide nucleus appears as a bright spot at the centre of the picture. Dust sprays out for 2,200 kilometres above it, in a jet that was not visible just seven hours earlier.

Astronomers are hoping for a similar outburst, which could unleash primordial material trapped inside the comet, after NASA's Deep Impact spacecraft deliberately slams into Tempel 1 on 4 July.



Biologists weigh up risks of synthetic genomes

Leading figures in the emerging field of synthetic genomics are launching a study to investigate the risks and benefits of the technology. They hope to provide guidance to government officials who may in future step in to regulate the field.

Using state-of-the-art DNA synthesizers, scientists can now manufacture stretches of DNA up to a few tens of kilobases long. The technology can be used to alter organisms

more profoundly than conventional genetic engineering, and might one day be used to create a completely synthetic organism.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the J. Craig Venter Institute in Rockville, Maryland, are teaming up with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC to launch a series of workshops to consider the implications of the technology — including the risk of it being used to create biological weapons.

"The development of synthetic genomics is potentially a double-edged sword," says Drew Endy, a synthetic biologist at MIT.



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