NEWS OF THE WEEK

Secret Weapons Tests’ Details Revealed

Documents released last week by the Pentagon about secret biological and chemical weapons tests have fueled the anger of veterans who say they were used as unwitting guinea pigs. But biological and chemical arms experts say that there are no major revelations in the documents—which they do illustrate the vast scope of the U.S. chemical and biological warfare program at the height of the Cold War.

The information was released as the Pentagon tries to document a series of 134 chemical and biological warfare studies that were planned in the 1960s. The tests came to light as the result of pressure from worried congress members fear that delays in launching the new scheme would require an additional Hubble servicing mission in 2007.

—ANDREW LAWLER

BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL WARFARE

Guinea pigs aboard. The U.S.S. Power was sprayed in 1965 with stand-ins for biowarfare agents.

Image not available for online use.
A misrouted trawling net has brought a haul of problems for the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The faulty net has been used for the past 2 years in NMFS surveys of Atlantic fish populations, which help regulators set catch limits for cod and other important species. Now, some commercial fishers and members of Congress want the government to delay controversial catch restrictions that they say might be based on flawed data.

The controversy, which some have dubbed Trawlgate, was triggered last month when NMFS officials disclosed that the 1000-meter-long cables aboard the government research vessel Albatross IV were misrouted. The cables are supposed to carry marks every 50 meters, so that researchers can repeatedly pull trawl nets evenly across the bottom in annual efforts to track population trends. But officials said that the uneven spacing caused one cable to be as much as 2 meters longer than the other during typical tows, in which the net is lowered 70 to 250 meters. That could make the trawl lopsided and possibly reduce catches. The admission, prompted by a tip from a commercial fisher who 2 years ago noticed contractors misapplying the marks, produced a hailstorm of criticism from fishing groups. NMFS quickly invited six critics on a 3-day cruise that examined the troubled net with underwater video cameras and called a 2-day summit between scientists and fishers. On 3 October, the two sides reported that the error had an as-yet-undetermined “effect” on at least eight surveys over the last 2 years.

Independent researchers say the scientific impact of the misroutig is likely to be minor. But the mishap has accelerated efforts to overhaul the 60-year-old Atlantic survey program, which senior NMFS researchers at the summit described as “broken.” Government officials and commercial fishers are already discussing ways to gather more and better data by using upgraded government equipment and getting more help from commercial trawlers.

Until such improvements are in place, some critics say the government should drop plans to help some stocks recover from decades of overfishing by limiting catches in New England and elsewhere. A federal court, for instance, has ordered New England regulators to cut catches by one-third or more by next August (Science, 17 May, p. 1229), a deadline Representative Bill Delahunt (D–MA) now wants the judge to delay for up to 2 years. “Given the documented shortcomings of the research, the only sensible course is to pause for a deep breath,” he says. NMFS officials, however, note that most none of the potentially flawed data were used in formulating the recovery plan, and they say it should move ahead.

Government fisheries researchers, meanwhile, hope that the painful glitch will bolster their push for better—and better funded—stock-assessment efforts. “We’ve been wanting to make improvements for a while,” says fisheries scientist Russell Brown of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. “We just didn’t expect to have to do it in this kind of charged atmosphere.”

—MARK SINCHEL
Mark Sincell writes from Houston, Texas.

News of the Week

Miscue Raises Doubts About Survey Data

All wet? Critics say mismarked trawl net (above) might have biased fish population counts.

Contributors: Jocelyn Kaiser, John Bohannon, Robert F. Service, Daniel Clery, Alexander Hellemans, Ben Shouse

Linear Leaders

The global competition to build the next huge linear electron-positron collider, a 30-kilometer-long machine aimed at answering fundamental questions in physics, appears to have become a two-horse race. Four teams are working on designs for the multibillion-dollar device, which would pick up the baton from the Large Hadron Collider now under construction at CERN near Geneva. But last week, at a meeting of the International Committee for Future Accelerators, Germany’s TESLA collider and a joint bid from the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) in California and Japan’s KEK particle physics lab emerged as the clear front-runners.

A panel that has spent 15 months vetting the four entries has identified about 30 R&D issues that must be addressed before physicists try to sell their favored design to funders. But panel chair Greg Loew of SLAC told Science that there are no apparent technical “show-stoppers” for the top two entries.

Advancing Aurora

The European Space Agency (ESA) is getting ready to give potential funders their first look at blueprints for Aurora, a planetary research program that aims to send human explorers to the moon and Mars by 2030. As a first step, Aurora planners earlier this month commissioned studies of four robotic missions that would test the technologies needed to send a rover to Mars and return samples to Earth by 2009. In December, Aurora officials will present study results to ESA’s 15 member nations and Canada. Funding decisions could come as early as next summer.

Fire Fallout

In an ironic twist, the cost of fighting this year’s record fires in the western United States has left many fire scientists without funding for studies aimed at preventing future burns. To pay for extinguishing fires on more than 2.5 million hectares, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has diverted at least $27 million designated for research. USFS officials say most of the money should be restored by spending bills pending in Congress. But for the moment, fire researchers have to cool their heels and possibly delay some planned projects.