AmeriScan: November 26, 2002

- Senators Question Yucca Mountain Science
- BP Exits Arctic Lobbying Group
- Costa Rica Seeks U.S. Help to Protect Turtles
- Whistleblower Wins Settlement Against Bechtel
- Jet Ski Bans May Boost Park Visitor Numbers
- Engineered Rice Avoids Some Controversial Pitfalls
- 22 Pennsylvania Hotels Certified as Green
- Eight Students Win Canon Parks Scholarships

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Senators Question Yucca Mountain Science

WASHINGTON, DC, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - Citing evidence of fraud and abuse, Nevada's U.S. senators have asked for a federal investigation into defects in the scientific process within the Yucca Mountain project.

Senators Harry Reid, a Democrat, and John Ensign, a Republican, referred to a recent story in the "Las Vegas Review Journal" which raised allegations of mistreatment of quality assurance personnel who identified technical deficiencies in the project. According to the article, two quality assurance personnel were removed from their jobs with the Yucca Mountain project because they were aggressive in identifying technical deficiencies in the project.

"These workers were removed because they were doing the right thing," Senator Reid said. "Their job was to monitor the quality of the work being done at Yucca Mountain and once they came forward and identified defects with the science, they were either terminated or relocated. Apparently, these employees were used as an example – keep your mouth shut or you'll be removed. I can't help but wonder how many other employees have damaging information and are afraid to come forward."

Earlier this year, Congress voted to approve the Yucca Mountain site, located about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a permanent repository for some 77,000
tons of high level radioactive wastes, including spent fuel from nuclear reactors. The controversial decision overrode objections from Nevada's Congressional delegation, state government and much of the state's population.

The news that some workers at the massive underground construction site have questioned the site's safety raised new concerns among critics of the project.

"We have project workers who are trying to warn the public about the possible dangers at Yucca Mountain," said Senator Ensign. "Now it appears that someone at the Department of Energy may be trying to silence those voices. No one should be intimidated, belittled, or fired for doing their job."

In a letter sent Monday, Reid and Ensign asked the General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of Congress, to investigate the quality assurance problems raised by the Yucca Mountain contractors. The letter also asks the GAO to look at allegations stemming from an anonymous whistleblower letter that there are problems managing the vast amounts of data that will be used to make a licensing determination from the project.

"After receiving this letter, we learned that the Department of Energy had issued a notification of potential catastrophic loss of data stored in antiquated storage systems," the senators wrote. "This information is crucial to the accurate modeling of the Yucca Mountain site."

The federal government has spent almost $8 billion dollars so far to identify and test the Yucca Mountain site as potential nuclear repository. The planned site is projected to cost at least $80 billion more to complete, the senators noted.

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**BP Exits Arctic Lobbying Group**

**WASHINGTON, DC, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - BP, the world's third largest petroleum company, has pulled out of Arctic Power, the group leading the campaign to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil drilling.**

BP, formerly British Petroleum, had been paying $50,000 a year to be a part of the lobbying group, and had often hosted delegations of journalists and politicians during tours of ANWR's untouched coastal plain, which the Bush administration has named as one of its top targets for
expanding domestic oil and natural gas exploration.

BP's decision to end its membership and financial contributions to Arctic Power reflect the company's increasing efforts to market itself as an environmentally friendly corporation. But Paul Laird, a spokesperson for BP Exploration (Alaska) Inc., told the "Associated Press" (AP) that the company will still consider drilling in ANWR if Congress votes to open the refuge to energy companies.

"This is not a message about environmentalism, and it's not a message about ANWR," Laird told the AP. "It's a message that we are not going to be part of this debate."

Until Congress decides whether to allow drilling in ANWR, BP will focus its efforts on "other opportunities" on Alaska's North Slope, where BP has invested millions of dollars in exploration and equipment.

"When and if ANWR is opened to exploration and development, we will evaluate that on the basis of whether it's competitive with other opportunities around the world," Laird added.

Arctic Power has about 10,000 members, including Alaskan businesses, politicians and individuals, and a variety of other stakeholders such as energy and construction companies. The group received $3.5 million in state funding last year for its lobbying activities, along with between $300,000 and $400,000 a year in private membership fees and donations.

While opponents of drilling in ANWR managed to defeat efforts this year by Republicans in Congress to pass legislation allowing energy exploration in the refuge, prospects for the permanent exclusion of energy companies look dim. With the Republican party set to control both Congressional houses as of January, and opening ANWR to oil rigs laid down as one of the Bush administration's top priorities, environmental groups are expecting to face a tougher fight than ever to keep ANWR's coastal plain untouched.

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Costa Rica Seeks U.S. Help to Protect Turtles

GAINESVILLE, Florida, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - The Costa Rican environment minister has written to Florida Governor Jeb Bush, asking the state to take steps to protect green sea turtles and their habitat in Florida waters.
Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, Costa Rica's Minister of Environment and Energy, asked Governor Bush to take "all possible steps" to protect Florida's green sea turtles and reef habitats near the Florida coastline that the turtles use for foraging and resting. The letter draws attention to the potential harmful impacts that planned and ongoing beach nourishment projects in Florida could have on nearshore reefs.

The letter was copied to President George W. Bush, Florida Department of Environmental Protection director David Struhs, and U.S. Senator Bob Graham, a Florida Democrat.

"Florida and Costa Rica share the same population of endangered sea turtles," the letter states. "Scientific studies show that many green turtles hatched at Tortuguero, Costa Rica, spend their juvenile life stage in nearshore Florida waters."

Researchers with the University of Central Florida have been studying the sea turtles that congregate on the nearshore reefs south of Sebastian Inlet in Indian River County, Florida. In recent years, genetic analysis has shown that these juvenile sea turtles come from throughout the Caribbean and Atlantic to forage on the abundant green algae that grows on the reefs.

A large percentage of these immature turtles have been genetically linked to the sea turtle nesting beaches at Tortuguero.

In September 2002, this link between the two countries was confirmed for the first time when a juvenile green sea turtle caught and tagged in 1986 just offshore of Fort Lauderdale was recorded nesting on Tortuguero's beaches.

Costa Rica's sea turtle nesting beaches and the surrounding rain forests support a thriving ecotourism industry, contributing to the nation's success in conservation and habitat protection. In his letter, Minister Rodriguez notes that, "My Ministry dedicates considerable funding each year to sea turtle conservation," and urges Governor Bush to take similar measures "to ensure that our shared sea turtles are adequately considered and safeguarded."

"It is only fitting that Costa Rica, a world leader in conservation, would reach out to Florida in order to protect these magnificent animals," said David Godfrey, executive director of the Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC), the world's oldest sea turtle conservation organization. "International cooperation is the only way to ensure the
protection of these highly migratory animals."

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**Whistleblower Wins Settlement Against Bechtel**

**IDAHO FALLS, Idaho,** November 26, 2002 (ENS) - Bechtel, the contractor that runs the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL), has agreed to restore 270 hours of personal leave to Clint Jensen, an INEEL worker who blew the whistle about working conditions at the Energy Department facility.

In a court settlement earlier this month, Bechtel agreed to confirm Jensen in the temporary position he now holds as a Project Planner at INEEL, and to reimburse him for all out of his out of pocket expenses, travel, and 80 hours of time attending trial and depositions, plus attorney fees.

Jensen said that he was "very pleased" with the settlement, and that he looks forward to returning to productive status at the site.

Bechtel took action against Jensen, a depleted uranium worker and INEEL employee for more than 20 years, after he complained to the Department of Energy (DOE) about dangerous working conditions. After the testimony of seven witnesses, and before the presentation of the defense case, the parties came to an agreement to end the lawsuit.

From 1997 until March 2001, Jensen worked as a manufacturing operator at INEEL's Specific Manufacturing Capability (SMC), a classified program which fabricates depleted uranium for lining the U.S. Army's Abrams battle tanks. Jensen's job included incinerating uranium chips and cutting and boring sheets of uranium metal.

Each night, Jensen had to mop and sweep around the facility's homemade incinerator to remove a black film encircling the oven caused by the leakage during burns.

Jensen began asking questions of his employer in March 1998, concerned about his own symptoms, the premature death of two of his coworkers, and why others had left the workplace with similar symptoms.

He suggested that the facility's Industrial Hygiene program was deficient, and noted that he had been ordered to burn substances other than depleted uranium in the oxidation oven,
in violation of the oven's permit. Jensen feared that his uranium exposure levels soared after he looked down to find himself standing in water laden with depleted uranium.

In his case against his employer, Jensen charged that Bechtel had attempted to silence him and keep him out of the workplace by:

- referring him to psychiatrists numerous times;
- increasing his security clearance, which prevented him from speaking with his personal physicians about his occupational health concerns;
- refusing to let him speak with a DOE official about his concerns;
- accusing him of abusing his short term disability and removing 270 hours of personal leave time from him;
- calling his personal physicians and urging them to keep him offsite; and
- placing excessive restrictions upon him at certain times and denying him use of a respirator at others.

"They tried to intimidate me," said Jensen, "but I stood up for what I believe in. I did it so that they will obey the law and other workers won't be exposed to the kind of conditions that I was."

Since Jensen raised his concerns, the DOE has reviewed the SMC facility at INEEL and found numerous violations. One reviewer and scientist, Dr. Melissa McDiarmid, stated that she observed a "cook book mentality" of Industrial Hygiene at SMC and that, "No truly competent person was identified by me who would have the working knowledge and experience to know what hazards to expect in a new operation."

Because of Jensen's concerns, the oxidation oven was dismantled, and new safety procedures and processes have been implemented.

"Clint performed a valuable public service by raising important safety and health concerns which resulted in significant improvements in operations at the INEEL site," said Tom Carpenter of the Government Accountability Project, which represented Jensen. "We are all very glad to put this matter behind us, and for Clint to be able to get on with his life."

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Jetski Bans May Boost Park Visitor Numbers
SAN FRANCISCO, California, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - Parks that banned personal watercraft (PWC) earlier this year experienced an average six percent increase in visitation over last year's numbers, finds a review by the Bluewater Network.

The nonprofit group's review of the National Park Service's (NPS) recreation visitor counts for the past two seasons showed that parks that prohibited PWC in April 2002 saw their visitor numbers rise. By contrast, those parks that continued to allow PWC use saw an average nine percent drop in visitation during the same time period.

PWC, better known by the trade name Jet ski, can damage to air and water quality, threaten public health and safety, harm endangered species and other wildlife, and eliminate natural soundscapes, charges Bluewater Network, a group which has led efforts to have PWC banned in national parks.

"The Park Service visitor data clearly shows that prohibiting jet skis from park waters may be a huge boon to local economies," said Sean Smith, Bluewater Network's public lands director and a former park ranger. "Moreover, these parks have the added bonus of improving visitor enjoyment, public safety, air and water quality, and natural soundscapes."

The statistics contradict the contention by the PWC industry that barring the machines hurts local economies by causing a decrease in park visitation. In fact, the NPS data suggests that more protective policies may be helpful to local economies by bringing new visitors to the region.

For example, at Fire Island National Seashore in New York which barred PWC in April, the seashore experienced a 20 percent increase in visitors over last year. At Big Thicket National Preserve in Texas, visitation was up more by more than 200,000 people.

At the three National Recreation Areas (NRA) which are now closed to PWC - Gateway in New York, Delaware Water Gap in Delaware and Pennsylvania, and Whiskeytown in California - park visitation was up by almost seven percent. In total, parks that prohibited jetskis welcomed an additional 1.45 million people during the first nine months of 2002.

Bluewater Network says the NPS data shows that continued PWC use may hurt local economies by driving away some visitors. At Lake Mead and Glen Canyon National Recreation Areas, two parks that allow PWC use, visitation dropped by more than 10 percent this year. Overall, at the eight National...
Parks that continue to allow PWC, visitation dropped by 1.37 million.

Increases in the number of visitors to National Parks can have positive impacts on local economies. According to federal land management agencies, visitors to National Seashores, for example, spend about $100 per visit.

At Assateague Island National Seashore, where PWC are prohibited, there was an increase of 209,000 visitors over last year, which translates into a financial increase of about $20.9 million to the economies of the communities that surround the Seashore.

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Engineered Rice Avoids Some Controversial Pitfalls

ITHACA, New York, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - A new strategy to genetically engineer rice and other crops may avoid some of the criticisms by conservation groups, say molecular biologists at Cornell University.

The researchers are working to engineer crops to make them more tolerant of drought, salt and temperature stresses, while improving their yields.

In releasing their research, the biologists emphasize that the technique, which involves adding genes to synthesize a naturally occurring sugar called trehalose, should satisfy critics of genetically modified foods because the chemical composition of edible parts of plants, such as rice grains, remains unchanged.

They report on their new strategy in this week's issue of the journal "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences."

"We have demonstrated the feasibility of engineering rice for increased tolerance of major environmental stresses and for enhanced productivity," said Ray Wu, Cornell professor of molecular biology and genetics.
Wu is director of a laboratory in the university's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences where stress tolerant rice has been under development since 1996 with support from the Rockefeller Foundation.

The Cornell biologists improved stress tolerance by introducing the genes for trehalose synthesis into Indica rice varieties, which represent 80 percent of rice grown worldwide and include basmati rice. The same strategy, they note, should also work in Japonica rice varieties, as well as in a range of other crops, including corn, wheat, millet, soybeans and sugar cane.

So far the transgenic rice plants with the trehalose-enhancement gene sequences have been tested through five generations - from seed producing plants to seedlings and more seed producing plants, again and again - and the desirable, stress tolerance characteristics have held true. Compared with non-engineered rice plants that lack the trehalose enhancement gene sequences, the transgenic rice plants are much more robust under a variety and combination of environmental stresses.

The researchers plan to report on their claims of increased food productivity from the resulting transgenic rice plants in a subsequent article. They say the trehalose gene technology will be placed in the public domain - instead of being sold to commercial seed companies - so that improved crop varieties can be cultivated in resource poor parts of the world where the need is greatest.

"World population continues to increase at an explosive rate, our arable land is deteriorating, fresh water is becoming scarce and increasing environmental stresses pose ever more serious threats to global agricultural production and food security," noted Wu. "Anything we can do to help crop plants cope with environmental stresses will also raise the quality and quantity of food for those who need it most."

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22 Pennsylvania Hotels Certified as Green

HARRISBURG, Pennsylvania, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - Twenty-two hotels in Pennsylvania have been certified as "green" by Green Seal, an independent, nonprofit environmental standard-setting and certification organization.

Green Seal, based in Washington, DC, is dedicated to
protecting the environment by promoting the manufacture and use of environmentally responsible products and services.

"The Green Seal program provides participating properties in the lodging industry with ways to attract additional business while lowering costs and helping the environment," said Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) secretary David Hess. "These hotels are setting the bar for the hotel industry by demonstrating to their customers that they are environmentally responsible."

The environmental standard for lodging properties contains 36 criteria in six major facility categories, including: waste minimization, reuse and recycling; energy efficiency; conservation and management; management of fresh water resources; wastewater management, hazardous substances; and environmentally and socially sensitive purchasing policies.

Green Seal received a grant from the DEP to identify and certify hotels and motels in seven metropolitan areas of Pennsylvania where much of the official government travel takes place. Those areas are Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, the Poconos, Harrisburg, Erie, Johnstown and State College.

As of this date, 22 hotels have been certified as charter members of the Pennsylvania Green Hotels Program. Each property will receive a lobby certificate to display their Green Seal certified status.

The Sheraton Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia was the first Green Seal certified hotel in the nation. It received its certification on its own prior to DEP's involvement in the program.

Employees of Pennsylvania are encouraged to stay and hold meetings at certified properties, when possible, in accordance with Governor Mark Schweiker's Executive Order on greening Commonwealth government. With initial certification complete on the first group of hotels, the Commonwealth will promote the program to all environmentally concerned members of the traveling public.

"Since forming the Governor's Green Government Council in March 1998, we have been encouraging all state agencies to incorporate these sustainable practices into the way we build state office buildings and operate state government," said Pennsylvania Department of General Services secretary Kelly Powell Logan. "I also would encourage state employees to use the Green Seal hotels whenever possible."
Eight Students Win Canon Parks Scholarships

WASHINGTON, DC, November 26, 2002 (ENS) - The Canon National Parks Science Scholars Program for the Americas has selected eight new PhD students as recipients of its $78,000 annual scholarships for work on conservation, environmental science, and national park management.

This year, the program has expanded to include students and research in national parks throughout the Americas. The Americas include the United States, Canada, Mexico, the countries of Central and South America, and the countries of the Caribbean.

By providing support to PhD students throughout the region, the Canon National Parks Science Scholars Program for the Americas hopes to develop the next generation of scientists working in the fields of conservation, environmental science, and national park management. The scholarship program is a collaboration among Canon USA, Inc., the National Park Service (NPS), and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

"I am always thrilled to welcome the most recent Canon Scholars into the program, and this year I am very excited about the direction in which the program is heading," said National Park Service Director Fran Mainella. "By including the rest of the Americas in the program the NPS becomes partners with others in this hemisphere interested in the preservation and understanding of national park resources. I look forward to seeing the new and exciting research projects that come from this partnership."

The eight winning students for 2002 are:

- Linda Erica "Rikki" Grober-Dunsmore, from the University of Florida;
- Mark Hebblewhite, from the University of Alberta;
- Patricia Illoldi, from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM);
- Jessica Lundquist, from the University of California, San Diego;
- Ramona Maraj, from the University of Calgary;
- Carolina Laura Morales, from the Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Argentina;
- Ashley Morris, from the University of Florida; and
- Marc Stern, from Yale University.
This prestigious Ph.D. scholarship program is the first and only of its kind to encourage doctoral students to conduct innovative research on scientific problems critical to the national parks.

"As a technological innovator, Canon understands the power of science; this is why we are so proud to be a founder of the Canon National Parks Science Scholars Program," said Canon U.S.A., Inc. president and CEO Kinya Uchida. "The work these brilliant students accomplish will benefit the national parks and citizens of nations throughout the Americas for decades to come."

Funded through a philanthropic commitment by Canon USA, Inc., the expanded program will award eight scholarships each year totaling $624,000 to PhD students to conduct research critical to conserving the national parks of the Americas. The Canon Scholars' research and findings will be applied to the contemporary challenges facing the long term preservation of the national parks throughout the Americas.

Students are chosen from the disciplines of biological sciences, physical sciences and social/cultural sciences. In 2002, technology innovation in support of conservation science was added as a new category.

Since the Canon National Parks Scholars Program began in 1997, students have conducted research in more than 45 national parks, and published and presented more than 55 scientific articles and presentations.