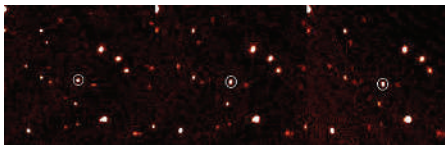
Possible planet prompts debate over definitions

The discovery in the Solar System of a body larger than Pluto has left astronomers racing to draw up rules to determine which objects qualify as planets.

The discovery of a possible tenth planet, currently named 2003 UB313, was announced by US astronomers on 29 July. This world of rock and ice is in orbit some 15 billion kilometres from the Sun. Planetary astronomer Mike Brown at the California Institute of Technology, one of the three-man team that identified the object, declared it to be a new planet and submitted a proposed name to the International Astronomical Union (IAU).

But the IAU, which oversees the naming of stars and asteroids, has no criteria for defining planets. A committee has been working on the issue for about a year and had planned to publish its results next summer. The new discovery has now made the debate more "urgent", says Iwan Williams, a committee member at Queen Mary, University of London.

PALOMAR OBS



World view: time-lapse images of a possible tenth planet (circled), which is in orbit beyond Pluto.

Government dispute halts bird flu work at Chinese lab

A Chinese lab has stopped its work on H5N1 avian influenza following a disagreement with the country's agriculture ministry.

The dispute began on 6 July, with a paper published online in *Nature* by the Joint Influenza Research Centre in Shantou. This reported a link between poultry in southern China and the recent flu outbreak among migratory birds at Qinghai Lake (see *Nature* 436, 191–192; 2005).

Chinese officials denied the link, then scolded the lab for not meeting safety standards and for not getting its work on the H5N1 virus approved by the government.

The researchers halted the project on 25 July, but argue that the lab meets World Health Organization standards. They also say that rules restricting work on H5N1 were not announced until after their paper had been sent to *Nature*. They have now applied for permission to continue their research.

Astronomy division calls for help to make cutbacks

Finding that it has more on its plate that it can afford, the US National Science Foundation's astronomy division has asked a panel of outside scientists to help it identify some $30 million in cuts between now and 2011.

With an annual budget of less than $200 million, the division is struggling to pay for ambitious new projects such as the Atacama Large Millimeter Array. The division's director, Wayne Van Citters, admits that the $30 million, which he calls "a target we may not be able to meet", would be just a down-payment on a larger problem.

The review panel, chaired by astrophysicist Roger Blandford of Stanford University in California, will meet for the first time in October, with a final report expected next spring.

Invaders cause rash of problems for swimmers

Flatworm parasites living in a non-native Japanese snail may have caused more than 90 cases of a temporary skin rash in San

Arctic survey plumbs the depths to find marine life

K. RASKOFF/NOAA

This delicate-looking jellyfish of the genus *Crossota* is just one of many other-worldly creatures recently plucked from the depths of the Arctic Ocean. A US-led team of oceanographers this summer explored the Canada Basin, an area isolated by high ridges and a thick layer of floating ice. Remote-controlled vehicles brought back thousands of specimens, many from depths of 3,300 metres and below. The findings suggest, team leaders say, that creatures thrive at far higher densities than expected in the frigid Arctic waters.

Francisco Bay in June. Experts say it may be the first time a US public-health problem has been linked to an invasive marine species.

The flatworm's identity is unknown, but its host, the Japanese bubble snail (*Haminoea japonica*), arrived in San Francisco Bay just five years ago — probably as larvae in ships' ballast water, says Andrew Cohen of the San Francisco Estuary Institute. The snails may have enabled the flatworm to spread onto the beach where the swimmers' itch cases occurred.

Ships arriving in US ports from other countries are required to flush their ballast water before arrival. But the procedure leaves many organisms behind, says Cohen. For instance, ballast water may have carried *Vibrio cholerae* to South America in 1991, triggering a cholera epidemic there.

Critics deride climate pact as excuse for inaction

Climate-policy experts have criticized a six-nation pact that the Australian government claims is superior to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

On 28 July, Australia, China, India, South Korea, Japan and the United States signed the independent agreement, which they had worked out in secret. The resulting Asia–Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate promotes the use of new technologies, such as renewable-energy systems and more efficient vehicles, to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

But the pact has earned scorn for not adopting specific emission-reduction targets. Australia and the United States are the only two developed nations not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, and they are widely expected to use the new pact to deflect pressure to accept future versions of the protocol.

International talks about what to do when the Kyoto agreement expires in 2012 will begin in earnest in November.