

News in Brief Pentagon expert disagrees with Anthrax opponents

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top Pentagon expert on chemical and biological warfare says the pleas of service members claiming harm from the anthrax vaccine fail to prove the shots are either unsafe or ineffective.

After a string of military and civilian witnesses called for an end to the Pentagon's mandatory vaccination program aimed at protecting against use of anthrax spores as weapons, Marine Gen. Randall L. West said he regretted their illnesses and the deaths of relatives.

But West, senior Pentagon adviser on chemical and biological protection, said the military also does not want to have to explain thousands of deaths in any future use of anthrax spores in an enemy or terrorist attack.

Power plants plan to increase general capacity of electricity

HOUSTON (AP) — Amid state deregulation of electrical utilities, a power plant construction boom is underway across Texas.

The 24 plants now under construction will boost Texas' total generating capacity by 13,817 megawatts, enough extra electricity to power Houston and Austin, according to the Texas Journal of The Wall Street Journal.

Most new plants will be fueled by natural gas and financed by independent power producers competing to be the first into a deregulated Texas marketplace.

The boom follows a decade with virtually no construction of new electric generation capacity.

The new plants represent a \$10 billion investment, said Sen. David Sibley, an architect of the 1999 deregulation bill.

"It is unbelievable," Sibley said in the newspaper on Wednesday. "It exceeded my expectations."

Other companies have also announced plans for plants providing another 17,129 megawatts, but in

Texas is the only state with its own power grid.

— proponents of power plant boom

lation suffered by California, where residents have endured shortages and skyrocketing prices.

Texas is the only state with its own power grid, proponents say, and also has created better regulations and more competition than other states.

But Texas' grid will need upgrading to distribute all the new power. The Texas Public Utility Commission forecasts construction of \$700 million in new transmission lines, which might not be enough to handle the load.

Addition of so much capacity "will put strains on the transmission grid," Robert W. Harvey, vice chairman of Reliant Energy Inc., Houston said.

Besides transmission challenges, some legislators, consumer advocates and energy-industry officials question the wisdom of becoming so reliant on natural-gas plants, with such fuel prices having doubled so far this year.

Genetically engineered foods lawsuit dismissed

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge has dismissed a lawsuit by critics of agricultural biotechnology who want the government to require labels on foods made with genetically engineered crops.

The lawsuit challenged the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) 8-year-old policy that considers gene altered crops to be essentially the same as those produced by conventional breeding methods and thus not

subject to the same regulatory controls as food additives.

U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, in a ruling Sept. 29, said the biotech critics failed to prove that FDA violated procedural and environmental laws in establishing the policy or that the agency should mandate labeling of the foods.

Unless the agency decides biotech ingredients are materially different from conventional products, it "lacks

a basis upon which it can legally mandate labeling, regardless of consumer demand," she wrote.

Genetically engineered crops, herbicide-resistant soybeans in particular, became popular with farmers in the late 1990s and are found in products throughout supermarkets.

The FDA policy was established in 1992 in the last year of the Bush administration and has been defended vigorously by the Clinton

administration. FDA officials announced this spring that they would propose mandatory safety reviews of new gene-altered products, but they insist they still believe the foods are safe. Such reviews are now on a voluntary basis.

The lawsuit was filed in 1998 by several anti-biotech organizations, including The Center for Food Safety, and a group of scientists and religious leaders.

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