



is trying to launch new initiatives while facing flat budgets. “It would be a shame to have him start all over on a new learning curve,” Mendelsohn says. Observers also suggest that the dual appointment poses a conflict of interest. Because NCI is a major developer of cancer treatments, “it’s a little curious for him to hold both jobs,” says David Feigal, a former FDA devices official who is now a consultant.

Schilsky, however, suggests that von Eschenbach could delegate NCI-related decisions to others at FDA. FDA spokesperson Julie Zawisza said von Eschenbach was not available for interviews before *Sci-*

*ence*’s deadline but noted that FDA is “looking very carefully” at possible conflicts of interest with respect to cancer drugs. “That will all be sorted out,” she said. As *Science* went to press, federal officials had not explained how von Eschenbach would split his time between the agencies.

It’s not clear when, or whether, the Bush White House will nominate a new FDA commissioner. Were von Eschenbach to remain in an acting capacity for long, he wouldn’t be the first: Crawford sat in as acting head for 16 months before being confirmed by Congress in July. Since then, tensions between

congressional Democrats and FDA have flared over the morning-after pill Plan B. In August, Crawford declined to decide whether Plan B could be sold over the counter. A week later, the head of FDA’s Office of Women’s Health, Susan Wood, quit, citing the agency’s rejection of sound science in the Plan B case (*Science*, 9 September, p. 1671).

Legislators from both parties are already highly critical of recent FDA actions. Once the White House picks an official nominee, they are likely to start asking some tough questions.

—JENNIFER COUZIN AND JOCELYN KAISER

## SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

# Hurricane Rita Spares Major Research Institutions

Scientists in Texas breathed a sigh of relief this week after Hurricane Rita weakened from its category 5 peak intensity and side-stepped Galveston and Houston. But the near-miss still allowed several major biomedical research institutions to field-test their procedures for weathering such a storm. “We really dodged a bullet on this one,” says Larry Donehower, who researches aging at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and lost thousands of mice to storm flooding in 2001.

Rita did trigger an evacuation of the area, shutting down universities and NASA’s Johnson Space Center in Houston and forcing Donehower and other investigators to protect their research materials and data. The anxiety was heightened by recent events in New Orleans, where flooding and power outages following Hurricane Katrina took a heavy toll on research samples and displaced many researchers (*Science*, 23 September, p. 1980).

On the barrier island of Galveston, the site of one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history in 1900, pre-Rita worries focused on the University of Texas Medical Branch’s (UTMB’s) highly secure labs for studying deadly infectious agents such as viruses that cause hemorrhagic fever. “We’ve thought about this for a long time, obviously,” says Stanley Lemon, director of UTMB’s Institute for Human Infections and Immunity. At biosafety level 3 labs and a smaller BSL-4 facility, researchers shut down experiments, autoclaved cultures, euthanized several hundred research mice, and fumigated labs, Lemon says. Samples

were locked up in secure freezers plugged into backup generators and stocked with dry ice, and a skeleton crew waited out the storm. But Rita caused only minor damage to air handlers on the roof of a building with a shuttered BSL-3 lab. There will, however, be monetary “costs associated with shutting down experiments,” Lemon says.

In Houston, research institutions bracing for Rita hoped they had heeded the lessons of tropical storm Allison. Flooding from that

2001 storm caused nearly \$2 billion in damages at the Texas Medical Center and drowned more than 35,000 research animals at the complex’s University of Texas Health Science Center (UTHSC) and Baylor College of Medicine (*Science*, 22 June 2001, p. 2226; 27 July 2001, p. 589).

UTHSC has since installed submarine doors in its medical school building, and animal facilities are no longer on ground floors, says spokesperson Scott Merville. At Baylor, there are still basement vivariums, but they now have “multiple layers of submarine doors,” says President Peter Traber. The campus is also surrounded by a dike, with floodgates at entrances. Generators, once at ground level, now sit on higher floors.

As it happened, Houston received less than 3 centimeters of rain, and Baylor suffered no damage—“not even a broken window,” says spokesperson Claire Bassett. “I was actually pretty confident we’d survive it okay,” says Donehower. His group taped windows, covered computers, and left as the campus evacuated. All but one of the five people in his group turned back, however, after spending up to 9 hours inching along jammed highways. Donehower was back in the lab on Monday, and, he said, “everything is slowly returning to normal.”

—JOCELYN KAISER



**Fleeing Rita.** Texans, including researchers, faced traffic jams as they tried to evacuate coastal areas.