



Accused. Plague specialist Thomas Butler is arrested for lying about the whereabouts of samples of plague bacteria.

say court documents, Butler met with a campus safety officer and “told him that I had noticed for the first time that 30 vials ... were

missing. I gave him this explanation to demonstrate why I could not account for the [vials].” Actually, the vials “had been accidentally destroyed earlier,” Butler wrote in a statement to the FBI. But he didn’t realize his account would prompt “such an extensive investigation.”

The next day, more than 60 state and federal investigators descended on the campus after a tip from university officials. White House homeland security czar Tom Ridge called Lubbock’s mayor to offer help. Butler repeated his tale to FBI agents but then confessed on 14 January, according to court documents. He was then arrested.

On 21 January, a federal judge released Butler on \$100,000 bail and required him to wear an electronic monitoring anklet. Federal

prosecutors have until late next month to seek an indictment. University officials meanwhile have placed him on paid leave, changed the locks on his laboratory, and barred him from campus. If he’s found guilty of lying to investigators, Butler could face up to 5 years in jail. Floyd Holder, his attorney, had previously said that Butler intended to plead not guilty to any charges.

The case underscores the government’s concern about bioterror, observers say. It means researchers “have to take [select-agent rules] just as seriously as issues such as human subjects,” says Paul Keim, a microbial geneticist specializing in anthrax and plague at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. But another microbiologist, who asked not to be identified, wonders “if the government isn’t overreacting [in] making a stupid lie a high crime instead of a misdemeanor.”

—DAVID MALAKOFF

SCIENTIFIC ADVICE

Spanish Researchers Vent Anger Over Handling of Oil Spill

BARCELONA—Ever since the oil tanker *Prestige* sank in deep water off the Iberian coast on 19 November 2002, the Spanish government has been under fire for its handling of the accident. Now, scientists are adding their voices, en masse, to the din of protest. In a letter on page 511, 422 marine and atmospheric scientists accuse the government of largely ignoring the scientific community in the aftermath of the spill.

Of all the government’s actions, most controversial is its decision to tow the stricken tanker away from shore and sink it rather than guide it into port (*Science*, 29 November, p. 1695). The government’s early assurances that the sunken ship’s remaining oil—an estimated 60,000 tons—would solidify in the cold depths have turned out to be spectacularly wrong. According to Spain’s National Research Council, roughly 125 tons of oil per day have risen to the surface, apparently because it has cooled much more slowly than experts had anticipated, the council reports. Much of the oil has ended up polluting more than 900 kilometers of Spanish and French coastline, causing an estimated \$1 billion in damages. By implying that its handling of the accident has been based on the advice of scientists, the government has tarnished their reputation, the letter’s authors contend.

Outside experts concur that someone’s reputation deserves being sullied. “It is difficult to imagine a worse course of action than the

one taken. The location of the wreck is ideally situated to spread oil along the coasts,” says oceanographer Desmond Barton of the United Kingdom’s Plymouth Marine Laboratory. “I was amazed,” adds Isabel Ambar, an oceanographer at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. “I could not believe that these decisions were taken based on scientific grounds.”

Spain’s science minister, economist Josep Piqué, acknowledged to *Science* that researchers were not consulted about the decision to sink the vessel. But he says that the government has engaged the scientific community ever since. “We did make contact with scientists 1 day after *Prestige* sank,”

says Piqué. He adds that the government has also established a commission to coordinate scientific efforts in managing the spill, evaluating the damage, and creating a science-based plan of action for future spills. Piqué defends his government’s management of scientific input, calling it “an optimization of available resources.”

Few scientists seem convinced. The government has worked harder at defending itself than managing the crisis, charges one of the letter’s lead authors, marine ecologist Antonio Bode of the Spanish Institute of Oceanography in A Coruña. According to Bode, government scientists, including those at his institute, were told in a 15 December mass e-mail not to speak with the press about the *Prestige*. (He and many others defied the order in penning the letter to *Science*.) Bode also chal-

lenges Piqué’s claim that a commission is coordinating a scientific response, noting that his team is studying the spill’s effects without any input from Madrid. “The government has no awareness of its researchers,” fumes Bode.

The scientists’ demand for better dialog with their government “is a sensible one,” says Barton. “What was obviously needed was planning prior to the incident and, one would hope, better preparation in the future.”

—JOHN BOHANNON AND
XAVIER BOSCH

John Bohannon writes from Lyon, France, Xavier Bosch from Barcelona.



Damage control. A robotic arm patches a gushing leak on the *Prestige* (top) as workers last month scoop up muck from a rocky beach in northwestern Spain.