

Full-Time Chief Scientist Appointed

Another important piece in Australia's scientific jigsaw has been added with the announcement that Prof Penny Sackett will be Australia's new Chief Scientist. The news follows the appointment of Dr Megan Clark as Chief Executive of CSIRO (*AS*, October 2008, p.1,13).

The Chief Scientist position has been vacant since Dr Jim Peacock's term ended in August. Peacock's term, as well as that of his predecessor, Dr Robin Batterham, was dogged by criticisms of conflict-of-interest – an unsurprising consequence of the Howard government's decision in 1996 to reduce the position to only 2 days per week.

Critics latched onto Batterham's industry role as Chief Technologist for mining giant Rio Tinto after the Howard government swung a bag of cash at research into clean coal technologies such as geo-sequestration while removing funding for renewable energy research.

Likewise Peacock's history with CSIRO as a champion for genetic modification sat uneasily with the anti-GM lobby, which argued that his advice was less than partial given his familiarity with the GM industry and the scientists behind the technology.

Thankfully Sackett will not have to battle such innuendo, with the new Rudd

government sticking to its promise to return the Chief Scientist to a full-time role.

Sackett is an astronomer whose research interests include dark matter, galactic structure and the discovery of extrasolar planets. She is taking up the position after serving a 5-year stint as Director of the Australian National University's Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics (RSAA). She literally endured a "baptism of fire" upon taking up the role when the RSAA's Mt Stromlo Observatory burned down in the Canberra bushfires of January 2003. Sackett oversaw reconstruction of the facility, which incorporated state-of-the-art technology.

Sackett says that encouraging young people into science will be one of her highest priorities, and she will practise what she preaches. During her term as Chief Scientist she will remain an adjunct professor at the ANU and continue to supervise research students.

At the media conference announcing her appointment, Sackett described climate change as "quite possibly the most important issue facing Australia today". If that includes support for renewables then the wheel will have turned full circle. Since losing funding under Batterham's watch, Prof Andrew Blakers' solar research is now



Cover Story

Ice-nucleating bacteria deliberately promote frosts, with the ice crystals they generate piercing the cells of plants to give them access to a rich food source. These bacteria are also airborne, and may also play an important role in the formation of ice nuclei in the atmosphere, triggering rain (see p.14). *Image: tufrey.com*

Erratum

Due to a printing error last month the wrong image was inserted on page 17. A corrected PDF of the article is available for download from australasianscience.com.au/bi2008/299megafauna.pdf

being funded by Defence, which is interested in developing light and flexible solar cells that can be carried by soldiers in the battlefield to power devices such as GPS, torches, radios, night vision goggles and communication relays (see p.20).

**Australasian
Science**
australasianscience.com.au

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PATRONS:

Australasian Science is supported by Nobel Laureate Professor Peter Doherty and renowned science broadcaster Robyn Williams, representing excellence in science and its communication.

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DISTRIBUTION:
Gordon & Gotch Ltd

PRINTING:
BPA Print Group, 11 Evans St, Burwood,
Vic. 3125, Australia.

PRINT POST APPROVED PP 331379/0032

ISSN 1442-679X *RRP \$7.95 incl. GST

PUBLISHED 10 times per year. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the publisher.

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