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Organization of the Climate Program

A year ago the new Administration announced three general administrative policies that have affected scientific activities, especially in the environmental area. These policies are (i) to reverse the trend toward centralized, White House direction by emphasis on "cabinet government," (ii) to improve effectiveness by reorganizing agencies, and (iii) to reduce drastically the number of advisory and interagency coordinating bodies. There are valid reasons for each of these policies and they may be justified in most areas of government; but in the scientific area they have negative consequences.

Departments now make high-level appointments of science administrators without direct involvement of the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) (the President's science adviser). The OSTP staff, never large, has been reduced, and the range of its activities and responsibilities has been further limited. Committees of the former Federal Coordinating Council for Science, Engineering, and Technology have been allowed to expire. Perhaps most important, the tendency of individuals to think in line with narrow agency interests rather than broader national objectives, which has always been strong, has been further strengthened.

The costs of these new policies are likely to be greatest in fields in which activities are spread over many agencies. For example, atmospheric research is carried on by ten or more agencies having a wide range of missions. Agency budgets tend to be focused on objectives within the mission and reach of the agency, while broader national objectives often lose out in the grinding of the budget process. Scientific leadership and manpower are dispersed throughout the academic and industrial communities, as well as through the various agency laboratories and centers. Under these circumstances, major programs in support of broad national objectives, such as the Global Atmospheric Research Program, have been possible only through the joint efforts of several government agencies together with the nongovernmental scientific community.

The U.S. Climate Program is an especially complex interagency program whose organization is at a critical stage. It addresses the problem of anticipating and reducing the impacts of climate change on society, it has been planned with participation by the nongovernmental community, and it is responsive to the interests of Congress as well as the agencies. As the Climate Program is developed problems of coordination and management must be anticipated, and as results are obtained vital national policy decisions affecting food production, energy, and land use will be called for. Unfortunately, the new Administration policies make it more difficult to develop the necessary structures for handling these problems.

The Climate Program cannot be developed within a single agency, no matter what plan emerges from the present reorganization study, and the academic community and users of climate information must be active partners in the Program. To ensure that there will be a clear channel to levels where policy decisions can be reached and agency conflicts resolved, responsibility for policy guidance and oversight should be centered in the Executive Office of the President. Some imaginative innovation might be productive at this point. For example, a joint government-nongovernment Climate Commission could provide the necessary expertise and breadth of view. The Commission could be the focus for consideration of major policy issues. It would take on many of the responsibilities of the National Academy of Sciences Climate Research Board, but in addition it would be directly responsible for making policy recommendations to the Executive Office.

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