Panel Pans DOE Management of Labs

A panel of experts studying the Department of Energy's (DOE) multiprogram laboratories has wound up its deliberations with harsh words for DOE's direction of the big research facilities and questions about their role. But it does not call for extreme measures such as a major restructuring or radical surgery for the laboratories.

DOE's laboratories have come under increasing criticism in the last decade as they moved from an earlier concentration on nuclear science to a much broader program of energy R & D. The Reagan Administration's stance favoring the private sector in R & D policy makes it unsympathetic to these trends; this has set the stage for several serious reviews of the labs' status and programs, including the current DOE exercise.

The multiprogram laboratory panel met on 26 August to put the finishing touches on a report to its parent body, DOE's Energy Research Advisory Board (ERAB). ERAB is scheduled to consider the panel report at its meeting on 9 September and is expected to use it as the basis for its recommendations to DOE on changes in policy for the labs.

The panel was chaired by Ivan Bennett, dean and provost of the New York University Medical Center and vice chairman of ERAB.* The panel was formed at the request of DOE Deputy Secretary W. Kenneth Davis after hearings held last July by two House Science and Technology Committee subcommittees on DOE national laboratory relationships with industry and the university community (*Science*, 14 August 1981, p. 744). At those hearings, the President's science adviser George A. Keyworth II noted a "certain dilution and weakening of purpose and mission" on the part of the national laboratories and said that the labs seemed to be "going somewhat afield of their original purposes." Keyworth has asked a panel of the new White House science council to study the national laboratories and recommend changes. Another investigation of the national labs is being conducted by the General Accounting Office, the auditing arm of Congress.

At the 26 August session, members of the DOE panel were in general accord on recommendations for changes to improve DOE management of the laboratories and to clear impediments to efficient operation created by law and departmental rules and regulations. In working over the findings and recommendations, however, the panel members had a harder time in agreeing on phrasing in the sections defining the proper role of the laboratories. The majority feeling seemed to be that, especially in the Carter Administration, work to develop new energy sources had been loaded on the laboratories when it could have better been done by industry and the universities. The panel sought a formula to correct the balance.

More decisive action was taken when the panel dropped from the draft report a recommendation for consideration of the idea that the government-owned, contractor-operated laboratories be converted into a public corporation. The proposal originated with AAAS executive officer William D. Carey. The draft report contained a suggestion that a detailed study be undertaken to determine the feasibility and desirability of reconstituting the multiprogram laboratories into a public corporation serving national technological needs. Public corporations such as the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation and Tennessee Valley Authority were cited as examples. Bennett and others expressed concern that the proposal would be seized on by the press and other observers and thus distract attention from the panel's other recommendations.

Carey argued that the proposal should be floated as a possible future formulation for which precedents existed in both U.S. and foreign public administration. Among the merits of the idea, he said, were that such a corporation could avoid many of the constraints now imposed on the labs and do a better job of technology transfer.

The chilliness of the reception given the proposal was indicated by the only procedural formality of the day; General Electric vice president for corporate research and development, Roland W. Schmitt, moved that the proposal not be included in the report. With a discreet parliamentary sidestep Bennett avoided the vote and said the idea would be dropped, but a way found to pass the idea on to decision-makers.

As for the performance of the laboratories themselves, the panels had little negative to say. The view was that both the capabilities and leadership of the labs were "impressive." On the counts of both management and funding, however, DOE was scored as deficient.

To overcome present problems of indecision and poor coordination the panel recommended that DOE designate a deputy under secretary to act as chief laboratory executive with authority to allocate resources, decide where work is to be done, and evaluate lab performance.

A number of other recommendations were aimed mainly at reducing problems at the managerial interface between DOE and the laboratories and buffering the destabilizing effects of budget uncertainties.

Defining the laboratories' role, however, was the thorniest issue dealt with by the panel. That issue came up last July in the House hearings on the laboratories. The late Arthur M. Bueche, General Electric senior vice president for corporate technology, urged a shift in energy R & D from the federal laboratories to industry and universities. The proper tasks for the federal laboratories were long-term R & D and high-risk projects where the national interest is involved. Even then, such work should be carried out in collaboration with industry and universities.

Schmitt, a member of both the panel and the full ERAB, is a forceful exponent of the views identified with Bueche. Schmitt took the lead at the panel meeting in the quest for language that would firmly leash the federal labs. The draft was to be reworked after the meeting.

Since the national laboratories were set up, there have been chronic tensions between those who believed that the federal laboratories should not compete with industry and the universities and others who argue that the labs are an important national resource that can retain their vitality only if allowed substantial flexibility in their R & D programs. It is a safe bet that this debate on the role of the labs will be central to the ERAB discussion and to the other deliberations on the future of the national laboratories.

—JOHN WALSH

*Included in the panel study were the nine DOE laboratories with the most diversified R & D programs. These were the three national laboratories in which nuclear weapons research is concentrated—Livermore, Los Alamos, and Sandia—plus Ames, Argonne, Brookhaven, Lawrence Berkeley, Oak Ridge, and Pacific Northwest laboratories.

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