Would Uncle Sam Sell the Farm?

Rumors are rife that the General Services Administration (GSA), the government's majordomo agency, wants to sell off a large chunk of land occupied by the Department of Agriculture's national research center outside Washington. So far, however, the department has agreed to give up only 260 acres of its valuable turf.

The Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) occupies some 7000 acres of a federal enclave nearly twice that size lying in semisuburban Maryland between Washington and Baltimore. The Department of Interior's sprawling Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center are also major tenants.

GSA has long been supposed to monitor federal agency use of land and dispose of holdings deemed not essential. BARC represents a large patch of prime real estate and GSA in the past has cast a covetous eye on it. But the new pressure on BARC apparently stems from a major Administration switch in policy on public lands. The White House has created a new Property Review Board separate from GSA in part to implement the idea that the federal land dowry could be drawn on to whittle down the national debt. An Executive Order last February directed all federal agencies promptly to review their land needs and indicate what was surplus. In the past, when federal land was declared excess, it was made easy for state or local authorities to acquire it. The rules were changed so that any potential purchaser, public or private, now has to pay fair market price.

The Agricultural Research Service identified two parcels, one of 247 acres and the other of 13 plus acres, as excess. ARS administrator Terry B. Kinney says that, as far as he knows, the two parcels are all that GSA has plans for.

Rumors abound, however, indicating everything up to transfer of BARC lock, stock, and barrel from the capital area. Apprehensions center on a scheduled resurvey of BARC land by GSA in mid-April. Suspicions have been raised by scuttlebutt from Goddard which recently underwent its own resurvey. GSA surveyors were quoted as saying that Goddard would not have to release land, but that "BARC was in trouble."

The tremors have been strong enough to rally members of the Maryland congressional delegation to the defense of BARC. Legislation that would bar the disposal of the designated 260 acres has been introduced by the congressman who represents the district in which BARC is located, Representative Steny H. Hoyer (D–Md.), and jointly by the state's two senators, Republican Charles McC. Mathias, Jr., and Democrat Paul S. Sarbanes. Not irrelevantly, Mathias sits on a Government Affairs subcommittee that oversees GSA affairs and Hoyer has just joined the House Appropriations panel that gives GSA its money. Both are seeking hearings to explore the larger issue of BARC's future.

Support for keeping BARC as it is also is being voiced by county and local officials. Tax revenues from private ownership of BARC land might be attractive to hard-pressed local governments, but the BARC green space has been factored into the local master plan and that seems to be regarded as important in the rapidly urbanizing area.

Rank-and-file scientist-bureaucrats at the center are mobilizing to campaign for BARC as is, if necessary. They argue that they have forged ties with universities and other federal research agencies in the area that are unique and could not be reproduced if, for example, BARC were told to go west.

President Tells Agencies to Lower Patent Bars

President Reagan is seeking by the proverbial stroke of a pen to secure a change in policy that has been stuck in the legislative process. Reagan has told federal agency heads that all businesses, including large corporations, should be able to retain patent rights on inventions made in the course of government-funded R & D work. This would extend to all businesses the liberal patent policies that now apply to nonprofit organizations and small businesss.

The Administration takes the view that giving the private sector clear title to patents on inventions developed under federal contracts and grants will lead to more rapid commercialization of new products and processes and combat a slump in U.S. productivity and competitiveness.

The initiative in the form of a memorandum to the heads of Executive departments and agencies is the latest in a series of actions taken over several years aimed at unifying the diverse patent policies followed by individual agencies.

During the Carter Administration patent reform was part of a package of proposals designed to boost innovation. Legislation enacted in 1980 (P.L. 96-517) allowed nonprofits—including universities—and small businesses to keep patent rights on products of government-backed R & D. The Reagan memo extends the same standards to all enterprises "to the extent permitted by law. . . ."

In the past, an obstacle to giving developers clear title to inventions funded by government has been the statutes of such agencies as the Department of Energy (DOE) and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). These statutes were specific in providing for government retention of patents and for liberal licensing provisions on such patents. The rationale was that such a policy would foster the diffusion of research results and transfer of technology. Critics in recent years have argued that the policy actually inhibits commercialization since companies say they require patent protection before they can afford to invest in production of new technology.

Attempts to modify legislation to permit big business to acquire patent rights to products of government-sponsored research have until now been deflected by opponents in Congress, on grounds that the public should benefit from inventions made with public funds. Representative Robert W. Kastenmeier (D–Wisc.), chairman of a Judiciary subcommittee with authority on patents, has played a key blocking role.

Administration sources say that the President's memo was worded so as not to conflict with existing statutes and that there is enough "wiggle room" in even the more restrictive agency rules to permit compliance with the memo.

Patent rights still cannot be transferred without a formal agency finding that such a transfer is in the interest of the government and the general public. The government would also retain the rights to some inventions—primarily those of use to the Department of Defense. In addition, the government would keep the option of using an invention in its own programs even if the patent were transferred and would retain so-called "march-in" rights to retrieve patent rights should an organization fail to pursue commercialization with sufficient vigor.

Science, Math Education Legislation on Track

The House of Representatives on 2 March passed a bill providing $425 million next year to improve science and mathematics education in the nation's schools; a parallel effort appears to be gathering momentum in the Senate.

The House bill (H.R. 1310) contains $300 million to be administered by the Department of Education (ED) mostly in the form of grants to schools. Another $125 million in matching grants to higher education would be routed through the National Science Foundation (NSF). The bill sailed through easily on a 348 to 54 vote. Attempts at major amendment of the measure were easily repelled and the bill was passed substantially as it came from committee (*Science*, 11 March, p. 1198).

In the Senate, the education subcommittee of the Labor and Human Resources Committee held hearings on a bill (S. 530) cosponsored by the panel's chairman, Senator Robert T. Stafford (R–Vt.) and ranking minority member, Senator Claiborne Pell (D–R.I.). The bill, which deals only with programs to be administered by ED, calls for $400 million in grants next year. Hearings to consider complementary programs under NSF have been scheduled for 18 April by Senator Orrin G. Hatch (R–Utah), chairman of the full Labor and Human Resources Committee.

Appearance at the hearings by several Republican senators advocating major initiatives in the field seem to indicate that the Administration's bid to keep spending on a new program in science education in eight figures may be trumped.

For science policy buffs, the floor debate in the House afforded a fresh instance of the continuing effort by Congress to legislate the White House Office of Science and Technology (OSTP) into an active role in implementing federal programs. A reluctant OSTP has always insisted that its job is to help make policy not manage programs.

In this instance, there was concern that if conflict arose between ED and NSF on programs, the larger agency, whatever the merits, would outmuscle NSF. Proponents of NSF sought a way to ensure a balanced scale. In committee, Representative Don Fuqua (D–Fla.), chairman of the House Science and Technology Committee, attached an amendment calling on OSTP to coordinate NSF activities with the postsecondary programs of ED. Evidently, OSTP reluctance to assume the role of referee was then successfully conveyed. During floor debate on the bill the language was further amended, to mute OSTP's responsibilities from "coordinating activities" to "to recommend and review the coordinating activities between. . . ." Which seems to get OSTP off the hook again, at least halfway.

History of Science Group Wins NEH Challenge Grant

The History of Science Society (HSS) has been awarded an $80,000 challenge grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to help HHS establish an endowment of its own. The society is committed to raising three times the amount of the grant to establish a fund that will give it financial stability and enable it to do a more effective job of assisting the younger scholars among its members.

Most NEH grants are given to support specific projects in the humanities, but a limited number of challenge grants—84 this year—are awarded for the purpose of aiding development efforts by an institution or organization. The terms of the challenge require that the grantee raise funds from new donors or from increased contributions from traditional donors. The grant is paid in installments—over 3 years in the case of the HSS—with payments reduced proportionately if the grantee falls short of meeting the challenge.

The History of Science Society was established in 1924 by George Sarton, the founding father of the discipline, who had earlier started the journal *Isis*, which is devoted to the history of science and its cultural influence. The discipline and the society developed slowly until after World War II when both entered a period of rapid growth. The number of graduate programs in history of science multiplied and employment opportunities increased both in teaching and in nonacademic posts in libraries and industry archives. The society now has 3600 members.

Because of this recent growth, the society's "demography is remarkably slanted toward young scholars," says Harvard physics professor Gerald Holton who moved into the HSS presidency at the start of the year.

The predicament of these younger scholars in the currently depressed academic economy was a main motive in competing for the NEH challenge grant. The society plans to assist by supporting good scholarship, says Holton. New funds will be used to bolster *Isis* and to revive another publication, *Osiris*, which printed monographs and other longer research papers and helped able young scholars to establish themselves. *Osiris* was suspended because of financial exigencies.

Holton said the society will also seek to foster career development by providing materials for teaching and creating a job exchange which will provide information and assistance on employment.

Holton has an entrepreneurial knack which he demonstrated as a founding editor of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences journal *Daedalus*, initiator of the Project Physics Course, and innovator on other fronts. He and his colleagues not only express confidence about raising the necessary matching money for the challenge grant but are looking beyond to a further endowment drive and to establishing long-term support for the society through a program of corporate associates enlisting industry sponsors.

John Walsh