

NSF-NBS Merger: Don't Bet on It

The Reagan Administration inadvertently kicked off a debate about the structure of the federal government's science bureaucracy when it recently endorsed a plan that would merge the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) and establish the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) as an independent agency. These bureaucratic shifts were almost incidental elements in a plan to bring together parts of the Department of Commerce and the White House Office of Special Trade Representative into a single Department of International Trade and Industry (*Science*, 24 June, p. 1363). So far, the proposals have made little headway on Capitol Hill, but the debate is expected to pick up again soon after Congress returns on 12 September from its summer recess.

At this point, the proposal to establish the trade department, and with it the idea of merging NSF and NBS, is given little chance of being approved this session. But the debate over the bureaucratic arrangements for support of science and technology in the federal government is likely to continue—especially since high-tech industry and the government's role in fostering technological advance is likely to be a feature of next year's presidential elections. In addition, the proposal to break NOAA out of the current Department of Commerce has considerable support in its own right, and there is an outside chance that it may be approved irrespective of what happens to the broader plan to create the trade department.

The action in the next few weeks will revolve around the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, whose chairman, Senator William V. Roth, Jr. (R-Del.), is the chief sponsor of the bill to establish the trade department. The committee is planning to hold hearings on the proposal in late September and hopes to approve a bill by the end of the month. But the bill would then face stiff opposition from some prominent Republicans whose committee jurisdictions would be affected by the reorganization. They include Senator Robert Dole (R-Kans.), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Senator John Danforth (R-Mo.), chairman of the subcommittee on international trade. Although the White House has endorsed the proposal, it has not yet mounted much of a lobbying effort to secure its passage and the powerful business lobbies have yet to throw their full weight behind the proposal.

For these reasons, the Senate Republican leadership is said to be reluctant to bring the measure to the floor and prompt some bloodletting among Republican stalwarts unless there is a good chance that the House will also approve the measure. So far, there is little indication that the House will do anything.

The House Committee on Government Operations, chaired by Jack Brooks (D-Tex.), has yet to schedule any hearings, and several other committees are waiting to see what Brooks does before holding hearings of their own. The House Committee on Science and Technology, for example, planned to examine the pros and cons of the NSF-NBS merger in July, but canceled the session at the last minute.

The science committee did, however, ask Lewis Branscomb, the chairman of the National Science Board, for his

views on the merger, and Branscomb brought the matter before the board at its August meeting. Although the board is supposed to be the policy-making body for NSF, it was remarkably reluctant to offer an opinion on the merits of the merger, and left it to Branscomb to write a letter simply laying out the policy issues and concluding that the link could be made to work if that is what Congress wants.

A little more progress has been made on the proposal to establish NOAA, which has a budget of about \$850 million, as an independent agency. In June, a bill sponsored by several members of the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, including the committee chairman and the ranking Republican member, was introduced. It would secure NOAA's independence regardless of whether the rest of the reorganization goes through. Similar legislation has also been introduced by Representative James Scheuer (D-N.Y.), who chairs a science and technology subcommittee that has jurisdiction over NOAA.

The merchant marine committee held a hearing on its bill on 4 August, and a string of witnesses, consisting mostly of former NOAA officials, testified in favor of the measure. Representative Norman E. D'Amours (D-N.H.) laid out his reason for sponsoring the bill: "NOAA's mission is largely irrelevant to the traditional mission of the Commerce Department. For that reason, the marriage between NOAA and Commerce has been strained from the outset. In recent years . . . that relationship has grown increasingly unsatisfactory. Under Commerce's stewardship, NOAA has been first in line for cuts, last in line for administrative support."

Others used less blunt language to argue that NOAA would have more flexibility and visibility if it were separated from the Commerce Department. Indeed, the original plan when NOAA was being born in the late 1960's was to establish it as a separate agency much like NASA.

The committee is hoping to hold another hearing on the measure in September at which Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige has been invited to testify. A staff member says he expects the bill to be approved by the committee by the end of the year. Scheuer's subcommittee is also planning hearings this month and approval is expected. It would then be up to the House leadership to decide whether to bring the measure to the floor by itself, or wait for Brooks's committee to move on the broader plan.

Meanwhile, the reorganization plan has rekindled discussion of a raft of proposals for revamping science agencies, including the creation of a Cabinet-level department of science and technology and a technological counterpart to NSF. Such proposals have been floating around on Capitol Hill for some time. The Administration has also taken a look at a broader reorganization of science agencies than was proposed as part of the trade department package. The Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), for example, looked into the possibility of bringing several nondefense agencies into a single department of science, but most of the OSTP officials involved in the discussions have since left the government (see page 1162). In spite of all the talk, however, the chances that any major structural change will take place are generally considered slim.

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