

Weevils Invade USDA Basic Research Plan

This was to be the year for launching a biotechnology program in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). But the plan may have been set back on 30 May, when the House Appropriations Committee voted out the USDA budget. It cut funding for biotechnology from the proposed sum of \$28 million to \$10 million and saddled the new program with one particular \$250,000 task: investigating Hawaiian sugarcane. The committee also provided \$15.5 million in new money for competitive research grants (to be added to the \$17 million already allowed). But at the same time it imposed a new list of items to be studied in the grant program, including such things as soybeans, alcohol fuels, acid precipitation, brucellosis, aquiculture, gypsy moths, boll weevils, and pine bark beetles.

The subcommittee chairman, Representative Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.), an implacable believer in the "accountability" of research, was responsible for this wording. Whitten's rewriting of the budget has discouraged some backers of the program. "It was a real insult," says one scientist who has lobbied for more imaginative research at USDA. "All kinds of miscellaneous and unmanageable stuff got thrown in. . . . This time Mr. Whitten has exceeded all expectations."

USDA officials want to avoid crossing swords with Whitten, but they obviously are unhappy with the bill, too. The administrator of the competitive grants program, Edward Kendrick, says: "It will be difficult to maintain the enthusiasm and participation we currently have in the program," if funds are chopped up and divided into specialty fields. The reason for creating the competitive program was to get away from this kind of top-heavy, categorized research management for which USDA has been criticized in the past. The aim was to invite proposals from those best able to identify new ideas: the researchers themselves. As other agencies have discovered, preordained tasks and goals stifle originality.

Remarkably, everyone seemed to agree this year on the need for a new initiative. For example, the directors of

state agricultural experiment stations—once critical of competitive grants—submitted a report asking that \$70 million be set aside over a period of years for competitive biotechnology research. The Administration agreed, fixing the first appropriation at \$28.5 million. The Department of Agriculture was enthusiastic. Both state and private universities were behind it. But chairman Whitten clearly was not, and the House will probably follow his lead. Now the battle over agricultural research moves to the Senate, which has not yet drafted its version of the USDA budget.

—ELIOT MARSHALL

Science Commission Created for New York City

New York mayor Edward I. Koch has appointed a Commission on Science and Technology to "encourage the growth of scientific and technological activities" in the city and to nominate scientists whose work serves to "enhance New Yorkers' well-being" for annual research achievement awards.

The 21-member panel, headed by City College president Bernard W. Harleston, is peopled with prominent New Yorkers including William T. Golden, Edward E. David, Jr., Frederick Seitz, and Nobel Laureates Joshua Lederberg and Rosalyn S. Yalow. The group met on 14 May, the day of the mayor's announcement, and will convene again in September.

The mayor's office is vague about what the commission is expected to accomplish, but according to commission member Gerard Piel, chairman of the board of the *Scientific American*, the mayor has a very clear purpose. He thinks New York "ought to have more science and technology in it—why don't we have a Route 128 or a Silicon Valley?" says Piel. He notes that goods production has been declining—the exodus of the garment industry being a noteworthy example—and the city's economy has lost diversity as it has become dependent on the service industry. But with the advent of clean, high-tech industry it is time for New York to get a piece of the action.

Harleston adds that the commission

will be looking at how well high schools are preparing students in science and technology, and will be encouraging universities to work cooperatively on projects affecting the city.

Piel says the commission has a precedent of sorts in the Health Research Council set up by former mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. The council, on which Piel was a member, gave out \$8 million a year in career grants, which helped keep many promising scientists in the city and resulted in "a whole new agenda" of urban health research.

At this point, there has been no discussion of money in relation to the science and technology commission.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Comings and Goings

Argonne National Laboratory's new director is former Exxon research administrator **Alan Schriesheim**, 54. He succeeds **Walter E. Massey**, 46, who has been wearing two hats as Argonne director and vice president for research at the University of Chicago. Massey will spend full time overseeing the university's research program and its ties with Argonne, which it operates on contract for the Department of Energy. Schriesheim joined Argonne as deputy director last September.

Roberta Balstad Miller, director of the Consortium of Social Science Associations, has been named director of the Division of Social and Economic Science at the National Science Foundation.

Louis Lasagna, founder of the Center for Drug Development at the University of Rochester, is leaving to become the dean of Tufts' Sackler School of Graduate Biomedical Sciences and will take the center with him. Lasagna will assume his post on 1 July. The center, which is supported by government and industry funds, was established in 1976 to study public policy issues related to pharmaceuticals and has been influential in public policy debates. A few members of the center's small staff will follow Lasagna to Tufts. Lasagna will head up a graduate program set up 3 years ago with money from Arthur Sackler, a physician and publisher of *Medical Tribune*, and his two brothers.