

NSF, Manufacturing Measures Deck NBS Bill

The bill authorizing program activities for the National Bureau of Standards caromed through Congress during the closing rush, and along the way picked up some controversial legislative cargo.

One amendment, tacked on in the Senate, has caused some unhappiness in the Executive and raised the possibility of a veto. This amendment, sponsored by Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), in fact adds a whole separate piece of legislation, the Manufacturing Sciences and Robotics Research Act of 1984. The bill, which is designed to encourage research aimed at creating advanced manufacturing technologies, also has a provision to develop programs for the retraining of workers displaced by the utilization of new technologies. The possibility of a veto is seen because the bill runs counter to the Administration view that government should not be directly involved in such initiatives affecting the private sector. Some \$52 million is authorized in the bill for activities in the coming year, but no appropriation for the measure has been voted. The bill was not forwarded to the White House for action until 19 October and the program's partisans have had no direct word on whether President Reagan will veto it or not.

The manufacturing science bill's language is that of H.R. 5172 sponsored by House Science and Technology Committee chairman Don Fuqua (D-Fla.). Gorton sponsored legislation with a similar purpose in the Senate, but attaching Fuqua's bill, which had passed the House, facilitated passage in the closing crush.

Another amendment, also affixed in the Senate by Gorton, changes the phrasing of the National Science Foundation's basic law to give engineering greater prominence generally by adding the word "engineering" immediately after "scientific" and "engineer" following "scientist" in section after section. The agency's name is unchanged.

The NSF revision originated as a section of the NSF authorization bill passed by the House, and was a product of the effort over the last sev-

eral years to respond to engineering community pressure to give engineering and engineers more attention in the science foundation's programs and more equal billing generally. The language adopted originated in a bill sponsored by Representative George E. Brown, Jr. (D-Calif.).

Gorton, however, stepped on some toes jurisdictionally with the move. He is the chairman of a Senate Commerce subcommittee that has had a long-running turf fight with the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee chaired by Senator Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah). The dispute has prevented the Senate from passing an NSF authorization bill for 4 years. Hatch went along with the amendment to NSF's organic act, but promptly noted in black and white in the 11 October *Congressional Record* that "I want the record to show that the addition of these provisions amending the NSF Organic Act of 1950 did not go unnoticed and should not be construed to give the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee any jurisdiction over the National Science Foundation."

—JOHN WALSH

Salad, House Dressing, but Hold the Sulfites

A government-sponsored study has concluded in a tentative report that sulfites, used as food preservatives, can cause acute allergic reactions in asthmatics. But this and other findings in the report reiterated what the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) already knew, and FDA is no closer to regulating the food additives than it was 2 years ago.

Many restaurants sprinkle sulfites on fruit and vegetable salads and potatoes to prevent darkening. Sulfites are also used in the processing of wine, beer, imported shrimp, dried apricots and prunes, snacks, baked goods, and some drugs. As many as 1 million of the nation's 10 million asthmatics may be sensitive to sulfites. Reported reactions include flushing, tightness in the chest, difficulty in swallowing, weakness, shortness of breath, and dizziness. Nonasthmatics may also suffer allergic reactions. In the past 2 years, four deaths have

also been linked to the consumption of sulfited food.

Sulfite-sensitive individuals often are unaware that they are allergic to the food additive. Two years ago, a Washington, D.C.-based consumer group petitioned FDA to either ban sulfites from food or impose harsher restrictions and labeling requirements. Last year, FDA acknowledged that the addition of sulfites was not such a good idea and recommended that restaurants should stop the practice. Although the National Restaurant Association has urged its members not to use sulfites, many still do. The agency assigned the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology to review the health risks of sulfites. The group released its tentative report last week, which is subject to revision before final publication.

"Of course the report doesn't tell you anything new," says one FDA official, who requested anonymity. "We knew we weren't going to get anything new. They read all the studies we read. The issue has fallen into a black hole."

The study "was a waste of time," says Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the group that petitioned for a sulfite ban in 1982.

To alert consumers, the report said, restaurants should post notices and processors should label foods that the additives have been used. But FDA has considered these proposals before and they pose several regulatory problems. The agency has few resources to enforce the posting of notices at restaurants and has urged states to take up the cause. Only a few states have required the notices. Although FDA now requires packaged food to list sulfites used as a preservative, bulk food—such as imported shrimp (70 percent of the total consumed) and peeled and processed potatoes—are not labeled after sulfite treatment. FDA also does not have jurisdiction over wine and beer labeling. That authority belongs to the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

The best solution is to ban sulfites altogether, Jacobson argues. Lemon juice or ascorbic acid can be used to keep food fresh-looking. Short of a ban, he says, the agency should greatly restrict the use of sulfites and require prominent labeling of all sulfit-