

---

## Lab Chief's Memo Stirs Unease at Illinois

---

For almost 20 years, the Army Corps of Engineers' Construction Engineering Research Laboratory (CERL) has enjoyed close ties to the University of Illinois, on whose Urbana-Champaign campus it resides. But in late July, those links seemed in danger of becoming unraveled when the lab director, Colonel Paul J. Theuer, engaged in a short-lived but heavy-handed effort to shut off collaboration between CERL and any university scientist who had publicly opposed the "Star Wars" program.

On 14 July, Theuer sent a memo to Louis Shaffer, the technical director of the lab, stating, "I want the word put out 'loud and clear' that NO USA-CERL projects or official relationships will be continued or conducted with those aspiring to separate themselves with the 'star wars' program—an Administration program. As part of the Executive Branch, we have to support the President. This includes any initiatives with Smarr and the Super Computer Center—it stops."

Theuer's target was a group of Illinois scientists who signed a statement pledging not to "apply for or accept" research grants from the "Star Wars" program because of political and technical concerns (*Science*, 26 July, p. 367). The group includes Larry Smarr, director of the National Center for Supercomputer Applications at the university, and 52 of the 72 regular members of the Illinois physics faculty.

Theuer's memo was leaked and widely publicized on campus on 25 July. The following day, Theuer and University of Illinois Chancellor Thomas Everhart attended a ground-breaking ceremony for a new CERL facility, and Everhart raised the matter privately. Theuer subsequently sent a second memo to Shaffer, for distribution to division chiefs at the lab, stating that the earlier memo was based on an "incomplete" newspaper account of the opposition to the "Star Wars" program. "I want to make it crystal clear that I do not wish to cut or in any way diminish our relationship with the University of Illinois," the second memo stated. The budget for CERL is about \$34 million a year,

about 25 percent of which goes to the university in one form or another.

In a telephone interview with *Science*, Theuer said his first memo was discussed at a meeting with senior staff at CERL on 15 or 16 July, and "it was agreed we would not take such a harsh position." He said the matter was dead at that point, and was surprised when the earlier memo surfaced later on. When asked why he wrote the memo, he said "I acted on what I considered at the time to be the policy of the Executive Branch. I was 180° out of phase."

Theuer says he has no desire to diminish relationships with university faculty, collectively or individually, and he appears to regard the matter as a tempest in a teapot. University officials also believe the issue is now resolved.—COLIN NORMAN

---

## Agracetus's Sojourn in the Regulatory Maze

---

Applications to field test biotechnology products are making their way through uncharted regulatory waters of the federal government and the going has been slow. Academic and industry researchers are encountering a lot of fog and a few rocks, given that the various agencies are still sorting out how to review these applications.

A case in point is an application by Agracetus, a biotechnology company owned jointly by W. R. Grace and Cetus, to field test tobacco plants made disease-resistant by genetic engineering. A year ago, the proposal was approved by the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But then several federal agencies decided to divvy up the responsibilities of reviewing biotechnology products. As a result, the Agracetus application also went to two divisions within the Department of Agriculture.

Then a federal court ruled that NIH must require an environmental assessment of these types of experiments. So NIH, even though it only has authority over federally funded researchers, told Agracetus that it should submit an environmental assessment. Agracetus complied.

As things stand now, one of the Agriculture Department agencies, the

Animal and Plant Inspection Service, has concluded that it does not have jurisdiction over the experiment. The other department review group, which is part of the Agricultural Research Service, has informally told NIH officials that if they do not have any problems with the experiment, then Agriculture does not.

NIH staff recently recommended approval of the experiment to director James B. Wyngaarden. But it may be another month or more before a final decision is made. Wyngaarden will probably want to check with the Agriculture Department, the Food and Drug Administration, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the Environmental Protection Agency "to make sure NIH isn't stepping on someone else's toes," an NIH official said.

(A few other research groups have ventured into the regulatory maze. For 2 years, researchers at the University of California have been awaiting permission from NIH to field test modified bacteria designed to prevent frost formation on crop plants. Although the proposal has been approved by the NIH committee, it is still waiting for a green light from the court concerning NIH's environmental review. EPA still has to approve the test, too.)

Agracetus vice president Winston J. Brill said that the purpose of the company's application is twofold. The proposed experiment will test a model system. Agracetus is not planning to market disease-resistant tobacco plants, Brill said. The application is also "to learn how to handle the government and how the government handles us. It's been a very frustrating experience," he said.—MARJORIE SUN

---

## Johns Hopkins Drops MCAT Requirement

---

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine has become the first major medical school to announce that it will no longer require applicants to take the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT).

The move is being taken in an attempt to end the "premed syndrome" that is driving students to premature specialization and an overemphasis on science to the detriment of general