

antee the right to inspect any suspect installation on 48 hours notice, although there have been suggestions that it may be prepared to modify this condition slightly.

U.S. officials say they are awaiting Soviet reaction to the proposals with interest. ■

DAVID DICKSON

OMB and Congress at Odds Over Cancer Risk Policy

A long-simmering dispute between Congress and the White House over the interpretation of cancer risks has come to the boil once again. As a result, a House subcommittee voted in July to cut \$5.4 million from the operating funds of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The gesture was a slap at OMB for its alleged meddling in scientific risk studies.

On 22 July, a subcommittee headed by Representative John Dingell (D-MI) announced that it was looking into the work of OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Dingell claims that, as a favor to industry, this office—headed by Wendy Lee Gramm, wife of Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX) of Gramm-Rudman fame—has been leaning on regulatory officials to downplay cancer risks. Dingell persuaded a House appropriations subcommittee on 24 July to “defund” Gramm's office in the budget. The issue has not yet come before the full appropriations committee.

The main offense cited by Dingell's staff involves some guidelines on risk assessment recently prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency, apparently seen by OMB as unduly cautious. Drafted in 1984, the new rules are in accord with an earlier White House study of chemical hazards, conducted for the Office of Science and Technology Policy. EPA intends to use the rules to standardize five areas of risk assessment within the agency, including estimates of the threat of cancer and genetic damage.

EPA had its scientific advisory panel review the rules last year. It also solicited public comment. The rules were revised and sent to OMB for final approval in April. There they sit. As of this writing, OMB has neither given its approval nor put its objections in writing, although OMB staffers have raised questions orally. In a telephone interview, one EPA official sounded exasperated: “It is time to reach a resolution,” he said. Dingell charges that OMB is stalling and trying to kill the section on cancer risks, which it sees as overprotective.

Meanwhile, in a speech in May, Wendy Lee Gramm indicated that her staff is “considering developing more specific guidance for performing risk assessments.” She stressed the need to emphasize costs and benefits of regulation, to let policymakers and not technical people set margins of safety, to consider negative as well as positive studies, and to use data from all animal tests—“not just the species that shows the highest estimate of risk (unless there is reason to believe that one species is a better predictor of human risks). . . .”

Dingell accuses OMB's policy analysts of blundering into areas in which they are not qualified to make judgments. As one federal scientist put it, “OMB is playing bully on the block.”

Gramm has responded vigorously to the criticism. In June she set out a new policy designed to let the public see more of the interplay between OMB and the agencies it reviews. All petitions to OMB on agency



John Dingell. *Investigating OMB's regulatory office.*

rules are to be made public, as are written comments from OMB to the agencies. Whenever OMB holds a meeting with industry officials on a proposed rule, the proposing agency now must be invited to attend.

In a telephone interview, Gramm denied that OMB is preparing substitutes for EPA's risk assessment guidelines. She did say, however, that, “We may want to do some follow-on guidelines to OSTP's work” at a later date. If that happens, the new guidelines will not come from OMB but from an interagency task force. Of EPA's cancer guidelines, she said: “Basically, we are reviewing them; nothing is being held up. . . . The staff doesn't have any real problems

with the science, but we want to make sure policymakers have a sense of what the uncertainties are.” She would like risk estimates to include an easy-to-understand summary of the assumed “conservatisms.” For example, a risk assessment for drinking water might point out that it rests on the assumption that a person will drink 2 quarts of water from the worst well in the neighborhood every day for 70 years.

Asked if OMB is seeking to rewrite the cancer policy adopted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1980, Gramm said: “OSHA has proposed looking at its guidelines. . . . We're not in the business of rewriting things. We are a policy oversight group.” ■ **ELIOT MARSHALL**

Britain's Royal Society Condemns Sex Bias in Math Teaching

Britain's top scientific body, the Royal Society, has found “no convincing or conclusive evidence” that the poor performance of girls relative to boys in mathematics can be adequately explained by differences in innate ability. The conclusion is contained in a report prepared jointly by the society and the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications that has just been published in London.

In contrast to those who put forward genetic explanations, the report says that the main reason for the difference in performance lies more in the attitude of parents, teachers, and examination boards who continue to portray mathematics as a “male” subject. The result, it says, is that many girls deliberately underachieve in mathematics, adopting a negative attitude toward the subject and associating success in mathematics with an “undermining of their femininity.”

Although similar complaints have been voiced by women's groups for years, it is the first time that such a strong complaint about sex biases in mathematics teaching has come from a body as prestigious as the Royal Society. “The result is that it is unlikely to be construed as a purely political statement,” says the society's education officer, Gill Nelson.

The report admits that the number of girls taking mathematical subjects has increased in recent years, but adds that the trend needs to be “accelerated,” given the importance of mathematics in both everyday and professional life. Problems begin in primary schools, it says, where boys and girls achieve