

# Congress to Investigate Charges That OMB Is Obstructing Data Collection

Dissatisfaction with what is perceived as meddling and obstructionism by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in data collection efforts by federal agencies has been simmering for several years. Now the House Committee on Science and Technology has asked the General Accounting Office to investigate OMB's data collection process to see if OMB is "improperly and unnecessarily limiting executive branch agencies in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information."

When a government agency wants to survey members of the public to gain information on the effects of its programs, it has to get clearance from the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), under which all government information collection was consolidated by the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980. The main problems concern the collection of voluntary information by regulatory agencies on matters under their jurisdiction, such as health effects, service usage, and civil rights compliance.

In recent years, OIRA has blocked or delayed many of these requests, citing the paperwork act, which says information gathering must be necessary to an agency's mission and must not impose an undue "burden" on respondents. Included among complaints are that OIRA staff do not have the expertise to evaluate proposals, that they often arbitrarily decide that the information sought is unnecessary or already available from other sources, and that decisions are influenced by the Administration's political agenda and the generally low value it places on social science research.

The request for the investigation coincides with a report on OMB's review of research supported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which was prepared by the Harvard School of Public Health. That report, done at the request of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's oversight and investigations subcommittee, documents how "scientifically untutored OMB officials sought to second-guess the professional judgments of agency scientists" and review panels, says subcommittee chairman John Dingell (D-MI).

The study, directed by Ian A. Greaves, found that between January 1984 and March 1986, "six major peer review studies from CDC were either significantly delayed, seriously altered in scientific design, or disapproved entirely by OMB." This despite the fact that the law states that review is for

paperwork reduction purposes only and that there should be no interference with the substantive programs and policies of the agencies. Three studies—of worker exposure to dioxin, video display terminals and abnormal births (*Science*, 27 June, p. 1594), and worker exposure to the carcinogen MBOCA—were disapproved by OMB and only approved after congressional inquiries.

On reviewing all 51 studies submitted to OMB during the time period, the Harvard study found that OMB was "seven times more likely to reject studies with an environmental or occupational health focus" than those focused on conventional diseases. "Studies with a reproductive focus . . . also were more likely to be rejected by OMB." Says the report: "OMB is clearly interfering with the substance of CDC research."

The Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) has been tracking the situation and has collected a number of examples, including the following:

■ OMB rejected all or parts of questionnaires developed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Veterans Administration that involved the collection of racial and ethnic data for the purpose of monitoring discrimination in their programs. Congress subsequently

wrote specific directives to collect such data into the FY 1986 HUD authorization. Efforts by the Commerce Department's Minority Business Development Administration to obtain detailed data on minority businesses were also repeatedly thwarted before finally gaining approval.

■ The Department of Defense, at a congressional request, asked the National Science Foundation to do a survey of the research facilities—infrastructure issue in U.S. universities. OMB refused clearance, suggesting that to do the survey would be "self-serving" of NSF and a departure from its basic mission.

■ The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management developed a survey covering uses of federal lands and attitudes toward reclamation, but OMB said the bureau was not in the research business.

■ The National Institute of Mental Health proposed a survey of psychiatrists to assess the prevalence of treated mental disorder, which had implications for outpatient insurance reimbursement. This was turned down, as was a survey by the Health Resources and Services Administration designed to locate areas underserved by psychologists.

COSSA reports that OMB's actions are having a "chilling effect" on agencies, which in many cases are "so demoralized by the process and the climate that they fail to submit reasonable requests." ■

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## France to Keep New Research Degree

Paris

The French government has changed its mind about abolishing a new 3-year doctoral degree that was introduced only 2 years ago by its socialist predecessor to bring the French research community closer into line with the practices followed in most other Western countries.

Under its initial proposals for a series of administrative reforms in universities, published during the summer, the government had announced that it intended to return to the previous two-tiered system of doctorate awards. Under this, the two main research qualifications are a "third cycle doctorate," based on a thesis written during the final 2 years of a 6-year university course, and the "state doctorate" (*doctorat d'état*), which requires on average 7 to 8 years of research following the successful completion of university studies.

The decision to revert to the old system, however, brought a strong outcry from the

higher education community. Top administrators from both universities and the prestigious grandes écoles argued that the lack of comparability with foreign systems made it more difficult for French research workers to find posts abroad—or to offer posts in France to foreign scientists. Some even threatened that, if the government went ahead with its plans, they would introduce their own independent system of Ph.D. degrees.

The French minister for research and higher education, Alain Devaquet, has now announced that both the old and the new systems will be allowed to coexist, leaving it to universities and the research community to decide how to maintain the appropriate balance between the two types of doctoral qualifications.

Devaquet's announcement was made during a debate in the French Senate on his proposed reforms. These have been prompted primarily by demands from right-wing