Briefing:

Estimate of Foreign SSC Funds Draws Fire

On 10 March, Energy Secretary John Herrington surprised many members of the House appropriations subcommittee on energy and water by predicting that other countries would chip in up to 50% of the cost of the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC). This optimistic estimate has provoked a flap among some of the SSC's congressional supporters.

A House science subcommittee on international affairs promptly scheduled a hearing for 16 March at which acting director for energy research James Decker was asked to explain the estimate. Decker said that the Energy Department's best "guesstimate," as he called it, in fact ranges from 25 to 40% (in kind, not cash) and is based on initial conversations with European, Japanese, and Canadian officials in January.

Members of the subcommittee were visibly displeased that energy officials are assigning hard numbers to what they regard as, at best, preliminary interest by foreigners in the project. Ralph Hall (D–TX), the subcommittee chairman, said "The best way to kill a project is to raise expectations too high." If foreigners decline to commit to the numbers that the energy department is projecting, and then the federal government cannot fill the gap, "it creates the impression that the project is not worth it," a staff aide to the science subcommittee said.

Hall noted that committee members recently visited CERN and other European physics laboratories and said "We didn't find that kind of optimism" about their potential contributions to the SSC.

There was also some discussion at the hearing whether there should be a minimum level of overseas contributions set before the project is funded. Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY) said that legislation authorizing the supercollider should require at least 25% foreign funding. Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI) said that the project should go forward whether or not other nations foot part of the bill. But, he added, "countries that don't contribute should be barred from [supercollider] contracts and their scientists would go to the back of the line" when researchers are eventually selected to conduct experiments.

Decker said in an interview later that the department "has resisted the idea of setting a minimum level of foreign funding." As for Sensenbrenner's suggestion about the way to select scientists for the project, Decker said that "it would be a big change in the way high energy physics is conducted now. Experiments are chosen on the basis of merit." ■ **M.S.**

Fail-Safe Mechanism on NSF Future Funding

The National Science Foundation plans to put tighter controls on commitments made for funding in future NSF budgets. The foundation was recently subjected to a chorus of complaints from disappointed grantees who are getting less than they expected after Congress belatedly scaled back NSF's 1988 budget in a deficit reduction move.

NSF director Erich Bloch says that the agency will tighten procedures under which program officers record spending plans for what NSF calls "out year" budgets. Bloch says NSF will provide this database with an "automatic triggering mechanism." At a National Science Board (NSB) meeting on 18 March Bloch said that commitments of up to about 65% of "foreseeable resources" for a particular year will trigger action—the implication is that the foundation will apply the reins at that point.

In dealing with some programs, NSF officials agree to multiyear funding that involves claims on future NSF budgets. This year NSF faced protracted uncertainties since a quarter of the fiscal year was gone by the time Congress completed action on the budget. Bloch says that the scientific community knows that the foundation depends on annual appropriations by Congress so that no iron-clad advance guarantees are possible. At the NSB meeting, however, Bloch did offer something of an institutional mea culpa on the cutbacks. "I must say that we did not handle it very well," said Bloch. He noted that in 1986 similar cuts had to be made when the Gramm-Rudman measure mandated agency reductions, but foundations officials had "worked very hard" to inform individual grantees of the circumstances and "very little was heard about it." This time, he said, "We did not do a good job of explaining it to the community." ■ **J.W.**

More Money for Costa Rica's Parks

Costa Rica's parks got a big pledge last week worth up to $3 million in local currency from the World Wildlife Fund. The money will mainly be used to add land to existing parks, World Wildlife president William Reilly announced on 17 March.

Costa Rica, a small country with enormous tropical biodiversity, is considered a leader in conservation among developing countries (*Science*, 18 March, p. 1366). Its efforts have already attracted substantial funding from overseas foundations and governments.

The pledge extends over 3 years. Initial funds will be used to purchase land for Guanacaste National Park, which is important for its dry tropical forest, and Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, a moutainous region where spectacular and rare fauna live.

The World Wildlife Fund commitment represents the latest contribution to Costa Rica that will be raised through a "debt-for-nature" swap, a financial transaction which multiplies the worth of a contribution. In this type of deal, an overseas group buys foreign debt at a discount and donates the debt note to a grass roots conservation organization. The government of the developing country then issues bonds to the local conservation group that can be used as collateral.

At current discount rates of $0.17 on the dollar for Costa Rican debt, the World Wildlife Fund will have to donate roughly $500,000 to ultimately be worth about $3 million in colones, the Costa Rican currency. During the past 2 years, Costa Rica has parleyed donations into $5.4 million. ■ **M.S.**

Translation Service Throws in the Towel

One of two major American sources of English translations of Japanese scientific and technical literature is going out of business at the end of the month.

The Japanese Technical Information Service is being shut down by University Microfilms International (UMI) because "the market isn't big enough," the company said in a letter to its translators. The UMI service was the main source in the private sector of translated Japanese technical literature (*Science*, 20 November 1987, p. 1032).

The service, which has been in business for 2 years, offered hundreds of translated abstracts from a select number of journals in a wide range of fields in a single catalog. But critics have said that the hefty catalog was too much information to wade through. In January, the service changed its marketing strategy and began publishing monthly reports covering a dozen specialized fields.

Its demise leaves a Japanese database—known as JICST—subscribed to by the Commerce Department's National Technical Information Service as the biggest source of translated technical literature from Japan. It, too, has had few subscribers. ■ **M.S.**