Senate Spares USDA Grants

An effort by the Senate Appropriations Committee to use part of the Department of Agriculture's tiny competitive research grants budget to fund about $8-million worth of pork-barrel projects has been derailed. An amendment proposed on the Senate floor by Senator Phil Gramm (R–TX), effectively removed the earmarked projects from the program by stipulating that the agency was not bound to fund them.

But the program, which has a $42.3-million budget in fiscal year 1988, is not yet out of trouble. An appropriations bill passed by the House not only cut the budget for competitive grants by $12 million, but directed that $5 million of the funds be spent on pet congressional projects (*Science*, 1 July, p. 21). A conference committee now must settle differences between the Senate and House bills.

In moving to protect the competitive grants program, Gramm warned his colleagues that "if we are going to let politics dictate the allocation of funds in areas that are supposed to be determined on a competitive basis with scientific peer review, all of our state universities will be pounding on our heads saying allocate some money."

The move was spurred partly by a deluge of letters that poured in from the academic community, including some of the potential recipients of the pork. A group of University of Minnesota researchers who are participants in the Midwest Biotechnology Consortium, for example, wrote Senator Robert Kasten (R–WI) and stated that they thought it would be improper for the consortium to use competitive grant funds.

A second amendment also was sponsored by Senators Patrick Leahy (D–VT), Thad Cochran (R–MS), Dale Bumpers (D–AR), and Tom Harkin (D–IA). Their action shifted $7.5 million away from USDA's in-house research program at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) to a special grants program administered by the Cooperative State Research Service, which Congress normally uses to fund pet research projects.

The move allowed the Senate to provide $2.5 million for the Midwest Plant Biotechnology Consortium, $2 million for a pest control center at the University of Arkansas, and another $2 million for food safety research at the universities of Arkansas, Kansas State, and Iowa State.

But not everyone is happy with the Senate's budget juggling. "It means we will have to cut out some projects somewhere," says Gary Evans, acting administrator for national programs at ARS.

■ MARK CRAWFORD

DOE Asks for Two Weapons Reactors

Energy Secretary John Herrington has proposed that the United States build two new defense reactors to replace aging tritium production facilities at Savannah River, South Carolina. Under a plan submitted to Congress last week, one new heavy water reactor would be built at Savannah River and a second unit, a high-temperature gas-cooled reactor, would be built in Idaho for a total cost of about $6.8 billion.

In making the announcement, Herrington said he was trying to establish "some flexibility and back up . . . so we can keep [weapons production] options for future governments open." The dual approach at Savannah River and Idaho is necessary, he says, to assure that production capability is not rendered inoperative by unforeseen problems.

The plan put forth by the Department of Energy would enable to government to produce far more tritium than it currently requires. Tritium reservoirs in nuclear weapons must be replenished periodically because the isotope degrades at a rate of 5.5% a year. Department officials have said that a single new reactor equivalent to one of the 2500-megawatt P, K, or L reactors at Savannah River would be sufficient to meet the nation's tritium production needs (*Science*, 29 July, p. 526).

But it appears that Herrington wants the United States to have the capability to produce at least 50% more tritium. "We don't know today what is in the future in the next 10 years. So it is a matter of assessing the risks," says Herrington. "What is the tritium we are going to need or the plutonium we are going to need? We make our best guess today and it may not be our answer in the next 10 years. So I want some back up [capacity]."

Whether the federal budget can accommodate Herrington's scheme is in question. "I am not sure we can afford two reactors," says Senator Ernest Hollings (D–SC). "We on the Senate Appropriations Committee will have to take a close look at that." One matter Congress may examine is the DOE's plan for building both reactors at once, rather than on a staggered basis.

Senator James McClure (R–ID) also favors the gas-cooled reactor, but sees it as more than just a new technology for producing tritium. He views this also as an opportunity to demonstrate a new reactor concept for the civilian power industry. Hollings also likes this reactor concept.

Although DOE has emphasized that the new reactors are needed to produce tritium, they would be capable of making plutonium, too. Herrington would not rule out their use for producing weapons-grade plutonium. DOE officials also would not say what the department's plans are for the aging P, K, and L reactors at Savannah River after the new reactors are built.

DOE says it will take 10 years to complete the new plants, the first 4 years of which will largely be devoted to conducting environmental impact statements and related engineering design studies. DOE is proceeding on an "urgent" basis and is planning to advertise for proposals from contractors within a month, officials say.

■ MARK CRAWFORD

Human Frontier

The Human Frontier Program, Japan's plan to support international basic research, is finally off the ground—a little way.

The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) has announced the availability of about $1.2 million in international grants under the auspices of a "preliminary" Human Frontier Program, according to Yutaka Hatano, a MITI representative in Washington, D.C. Five grants worth up to about $230,000 will be allotted among five research teams. The money will support basic research in higher order brain functions and molecular level recognition and response.

Researchers from the European Community, Canada, and the United States are eligible to form teams to compete for the grants. Each team must include scientists from at least three nations in the group and from Japan. The duration of the grants is for up to 2½ years.

The application deadline is 20 September 1988, but Hatano said that it is not strict. The important thing is for applicants to submit a request for an application by that date, he said. Application forms and more information can be obtained by writing the Human Frontier Science Program Office, Agency of Industrial Science and Technology, MITI, 1-3-1, Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100, Japan. ■ M.S.