Briefings

edited by MARK H. CRAWFORD

Canadian Sciences Net $240 Million

The decision is a year late, but Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney has finally determined how his government will distribute $240 million to launch the Networks of Centers of Excellence program.

Modeled on a successful program already in place in the province of Ontario, the federal effort consists of consortia of industry, government, and academic institutions working together on a broad range of basic and applied research projects designed ultimately to enhance Canadian industrial competitiveness.

The government has ballyhooed the networks as a testimony to Canada's commitment to science. But critics charge that support for the networks will only partly make up for funding cutbacks in basic research programs that have occurred in recent years.

Among the 14 funded networks are the Canadian Network for Space Research, the Institute for Robotics and Intelligent Systems, Genetic Basis of Human Disease, Neural Regeneration and Functional Recovery, and the Ocean Production Enhancement Network.

Fears that political factors would outweigh scientific judgments in whittling the 158 applicants down to the 14 winners failed to materialize. But one insider reports that at least one center was included as a political payoff for Quebec's support of Mulroney's free trade agreement signed with the United States.

How Color Affects People and Work

Would surroundings of a meditative blue or an intellectually stimulating yellow help space station personnel be more relaxed and productive during their long sojourns in the ether?

NASA scientists now designing long-term space flights are watching for the results of a study by a University of Texas home economist who is conducting a long-term assessment of how interior colors affect workers' moods and performance.

Nancy Kwallek of UT Austin's Division of Interior Design is recruiting 108 clerical workers, each of whom will do their jobs in one of three differently colored offices over a period of 30 months.

At the end, the workers, who are not supposed to know the purpose of the study, will be assessed on performance, error rates, tardiness, absenteeism, and reaction to their office interiors.

The privately funded study costing $142,000 will be used to develop a database for interior designers and scientists designing work space environments.

According to the university, "Johnson Space Center engineers are providing illumination specifications for the space module so that the test offices used in the research will be similar to the module's interior."

Neuroscience Crisis at Washington U.?

The neuroscience program at Washington University School of Medicine may be about to lose two of its superstars, and there are rumors that several younger faculty members may leave with them.

Science has learned that Gerald Fischbach, head of the university's Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology since 1981, is considering an offer to take a comparable position at Harvard University. And Dale Purves, who is well known for his études of how nerve cells form connections, has already accepted a position as chairman of the new Department of Neurobiology that is being established at Duke University.

Along with this news, which surfaced at the Neuroscience Society meeting in Phoenix last week, was speculation that the young faculty members who were recruited by Fischbach may leave because they fear that they will be denied tenure without the support of their department chairman.

But university officials say these rumors are nonsense. "I know of nobody else who has plans to leave," says William Peck, who is both dean of the medical school and vice-chancellor for medical affairs.

As for the impact of a Fischbach departure, Peck says "it would be a major loss, but wouldn't deter us from our commitment to the program." Washington University, he says, could recover as it did a decade ago when the well-regarded former chairman, Maxwell Cowan, left the university for greener pastures.

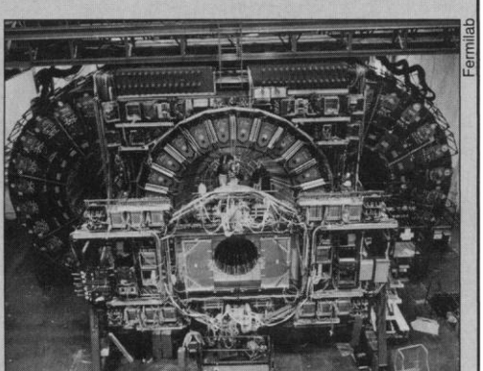
Physics Budget Squeeze Ahead at Energy

With the Superconducting Super Collider moving into the construction phase, these should be good times for high energy physics. But researchers at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory and the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) may not think so.

Department of Energy budget projections for the next fiscal year indicate that cutbacks in the operation of their particle accelerators lie ahead. Fermilab director John Peoples says there may be no more experiments on the Tevatron's collider until fiscal 1992. Completion of a new particle detector and an upgrade of the massive CDF detector may be delayed, and some experiments could be abandoned, he says.

Researchers at SLAC are going to be confronted with similar problems, says Charles Prescott, associate director of research, if DOE's overall budget for high energy physics is held to $600 million—a $5-million increase over what Congress approved for this year.

Because fixed laboratory operating costs such as electricity are rising, he says, running time for the Stanford Linear Collider and other operations will be cut back and some layoffs could be necessary.



Fermilab detector. *Upgrades to this proton-antiproton particle detector may be put off because of tight budgets. Tevatron collider operations could be cut.*

Sellers' Market for Scarce Chemists

The widely predicted scientific manpower crunch of the 1990s is already showing up in shortages of professional chemists and chemical engineers, according to the American Chemical Society.

Chemical & Engineering News reports that "for the first time since the late 1970s, recruiters report that there seem to be more jobs for new B.S. chemical engineers and Ph.D. chemists than there are qualified candidates to fill them." Particularly noteworthy has been a decline in chemistry bachelor's degrees, from 11,322 in 1977 to 9,661 in 1987.

Companies are responding by offering higher salaries and more bonuses and hiring more foreign graduates, says the magazine.