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NASA Satellites Could Use a Jump-Start

Don't mistake the batteries that power U.S. satellites for Sears Diehards. According to officials at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), a bad lot of batteries may wind up shutting down several satellites—including the \$633 million Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite (UARS)—sooner than expected.

NASA scientists first detected a problem with battery cells last year in the Compton Gamma Ray Observatory (GRO). Of GRO's six nickel-cadmium batteries, whose cells were made by Gates Aerospace Battery Co., one is dead and another is working poorly. Now NASA has traced batteries from the same lot to other satellites, including UARS, which collects data on atmospheric chemistry related to global change, the Ocean Topography Experiment (TOPEX) satellite, and the Extreme Ultraviolet Explorer.

NASA scientists have begun



Running out of juice? Bum batteries may force UARS and other satellites to go incommunicado sooner than expected.

tinkering with the satellites to try to boost their power reserves. For example, to ensure that UARS will survive to finish its minimum 18-month mission (set to end this spring), NASA scientists had to make adjustments in UARS' solar array and other hardware. Still, they'll feel some pain: Instead of collecting extra data from UARS for 10 to 12 years, as they'd hoped, the scientists now estimate that

contact with the satellite will last only 4 or 5 years. They're worrying about a similarly shortened lifespan for TOPEX as well.

That leaves NASA officials looking for a silver lining. And it didn't take long for top NASA scientist Lennard Fisk to find one. At a meeting last week, he said, half-jokingly, that the bum batteries will at least slash the data-analysis budget.

Dingell Riled, UC on Edge

Representative John Dingell (D-MI) is rattling the cages once again, this time at the headquarters of the University of California (UC). The cause of his wrath: UC officials, who manage the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under contract to the De-

partment of Energy (DOE), failed to notify DOE that Livermore's top lawyer was under investigation for questionable stock transactions last year (*Science*, 11 December 1992, p. 1723). The lab's former chief counsel, William DeGarmo, has conceded no wrongdoing, but paid a fine last year to the Securities and Exchange Com-

mission. In January, UC dropped DeGarmo from its payroll.

Dingell was upset because he argues that the university never told DOE about the problem during the securities commission's 11-month investigation, which ended in December. In one of his notorious "Dingell-grams" to DOE, dated 17 December, the congressman demanded to know "what actions...DOE has under way regarding this situation." DOE has not acted against the university, but the agency's inspector general wrote to Dingell saying, among other things, that he has urged DOE to "consider debarment" of UC for mismanagement of the laboratory.

The university is baffled, says spokesman Rick Malaspina. He says that UC officials did notify DOE higher-ups of the DeGarmo problem when it was appropriate—after the investigation ended. UC officials are anxious to see what Dingell will do at a 17 February hearing billed as a review of "DOE contracting abuses."

Hopes for New Science Agencies Fade

'Tis the season for moving campaign promises to the back burner—or entirely off the stove. That goes for science policy, too: President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore apparently have cooled to Democrats' hopes to create a Department of the Environment and a "civilian DARPA," a technology-boosting bureaucracy modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

In a not-for-attribution talk with scientists, a top aide said that the young administration is not ready to face the political heat that would arise from an attempt to shift environmental offices from several departments to a single jurisdiction. The time may come for an environmental reorganization—but probably not until fall, the aide said.

Meanwhile, presidential science adviser John Gibbons has confirmed what others have been hinting about the civilian-DARPA proposal—namely, that Clinton no longer feels it's necessary. Gibbons said during his confirmation hearing that "at this point in time, the most appropriate way to go is to fully utilize the resources we have." How so? He said that the Administration will "expand" the role of the national labs and the Commerce Department in promoting new technologies.

Growth Hormone Trials To Continue

A special outside committee has cleared the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to proceed with a clinical trial to assess synthetic human growth hormone (hGH) as a treatment to make healthy, short children taller.

Last June, biotech critic Jeremy Rifkin petitioned the NIH to halt the trial. He has assailed the 8-year-old study as an NIH move to press beyond studying diseases into the realm of manipulating traits (*Science*, 7 August 1992, p. 739). Partly in response to Rifkin's petition, NIH Director Bernadine Healy convened a committee of outside reviewers to examine two hGH studies: one on healthy children and one on girls with Turner's syndrome.

Science recently obtained the committee's report on the healthy children trial. (The panel is still examining the Turner's data.) The committee concluded that while numerous injections of hGH or placebo constitute a "greater than minimal" increase in risk, eight of the nine committee members agreed that the trial complies with regulations mandating that such research must be "likely to yield generalizable knowledge about the subject's disorder." The panel acknowledges that it struggled to reach this conclusion, noting that "the judgments called for were difficult and the comparisons troublesome."

The committee also called for the creation of a data safety and monitoring board (DSMB) to assess the statistical treatment of data and to oversee the trials. A study investigator says a DSMB is being formed and will meet in a month or two. "The request for a DSMB is an important request... it's not routine," one NIH official, characterizing the report as a "hesitating approval" for the trial, told *Science*.

Rifkin and his lawyers, of course, are displeased. But they're biting their tongue until Healy responds to the petition. And what if Healy turns it down? Says Rifkin lawyer Andrew Kimbrell, "The next step for us would be litigation."