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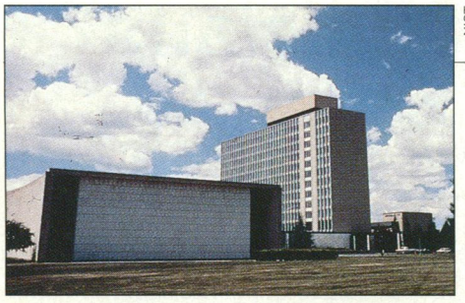

NIST

Link to outside world. NIST computer science is slated to become more industry friendly.

New Role for NIST Computer Science

Computer science at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is about to be reorganized to encourage greater collaboration with industry. Last month, NIST director Arati Prabhakar revealed plans to merge the Computer Systems Lab and the Computer and Applied Math Lab into a single shop that she says will better serve industry needs.

One stimulus for redefining NIST's computer role is new money—and lots of it. This year, NIST computer science received $75.8 million, a 100% increase over last year. Currently half the work is contract jobs for other agencies. But Prabhakar wants to see more interaction with industry. She told *Science* that NIST hopes to improve industry standards, by designing, for instance, new software systems for parallel computers and electronic commerce.

EPA Scientists Brace For Major Changes

A big shake-up looms for scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Next week, EPA administrator Carol Browner is expected to present to Congress a plan to consolidate EPA's 12 research labs into four "mega-labs" as part of a major overhaul of agency science.

In May, the MITRE Corporation prepared a report that ranked lab consolidation as the top option for improving EPA science (*Science*, 20 May, p. 1077). Heeding this advice, an internal EPA panel last month recommended that the agency create mega-labs devoted to ecology, health effects, environmental engineering, and monitoring.

The lab consolidation will entail transferring hundreds of EPA scientists and support staff to new locations, says one official. Some outside experts say they are awed that Browner is willing to tackle the daunting task of closing labs. "The amount of turmoil it will cause will be enormous," says environmental scientist Bernard Goldstein, a former EPA research chief now at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center.

In addition to mega-labs, EPA intends to pursue at least seven other MITRE recommendations. These include devoting at least half of EPA's research budget to long-term projects, spending a greater proportion of funds on extramural science, and expanding internal peer review. "I believe that bold and far-reaching actions are needed to bolster the credibility of our science program," Browner said in a 24 June letter to staff. EPA must deliver a plan for implementing changes to Congress by 1 October.

NIH AIDS Office Clings to Power

With a helping hand from National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Harold Varmus, the Office of AIDS Research (OAR) may keep its newfound clout—despite attempts to weaken it. The House is expected to pass legislation that, for the first time, will give control of NIH's $1.34-billion AIDS budget to OAR.

Last year, AIDS researchers and activists convinced Congress to grant OAR power to set the agenda for all NIH AIDS research. The reformers insisted that Congress funnel all AIDS funding through OAR, which could withhold money from any institute that failed to stick to the agenda. But NIH institute directors and several scientific societies fought this budget authority, and earlier this year had convinced some House appropriations members to continue sending money directly to institutes.

The tide turned in May, when Varmus sent a letter to Congress that a House staffer says persuaded members to retain OAR's power. In the 17 May letter, Varmus said it was his "strong conviction" that the budget authority was "essential for better management and scientific oversight of the vast HIV/AIDS research effort at the NIH." As *Science* went to press, the House NIH appropriations bill with OAR receiving the AIDS funds was expected to pass without opposition. The Senate is expected to consider the provision later this summer.

Political Battle Could Claim Fusion Reactor

Hell hath no fury like a Senator scorned, and Bennett Johnston (D–LA)—the powerful chair of the Senate energy appropriations subcommittee—is a prime example. Last year, after the Administration gave lukewarm support to the Superconducting Super Collider and allowed Congress to kill it, Johnston vowed to prevent the same fate for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), a planned multi-billion-dollar international fusion project. So he took a hostage: the Tokamak Physics Experiment (TPX), the next big fusion project at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. Until the President publicly pledged to support ITER, Johnston said, he would block TPX construction.

Last week's markup of the Senate energy appropriations bill was Johnston's deadline for the President to respond, but the best the White House could do was circulate a letter affirming its "commitment to a strong, balanced program for...fusion energy." That wasn't good enough for Johnston, who, true to his word, deleted all but $2 million of the $67 million TPX construction request. However, he did agree to give Princeton $28 million to keep TPX designers working and $75 million to operate its record-setting Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor for another year.

Meanwhile, the House appropriations bill fully funds TPX this year. Now the Senate and House must meet in conference in mid-July to hammer out their differences. Warns a Johnston staffer: The Senator "is likely to maintain [the TPX cut] in conference." Princeton officials declined to reveal plans should the cuts stick.

Getting the Goods to Former Soviet Scientists

Doing science is a challenge for researchers in the former Soviet Union (FSU), many of whom can barely afford to eat, let alone scrape up money for supplies. Now the International Science Foundation (ISF) has a new idea for giving FSU scientists what they cannot buy: a service to deliver to them research equipment donated by Western organizations.

The ISF, funded by billionaire financier George Soros, has committed nearly $100 million to research in the FSU over the next 3 years, mostly in peer-reviewed grants to scientists averaging $15,000 each (*Science*, 27 May, p. 1261). That may be plenty of money for salaries and lab chemicals, but it doesn't go very far toward such high-priced equipment as spectrophotometers or ultracentrifuges.

That's why earlier this week, ISF's directors approved a plan to start a service in which the foundation will ship donated equipment from its warehouse in Queens to its offices in Kiev, Ukraine, Vilnius, Lithuania, and Moscow, where FSU scientists will collect the goods. "This is the next big step for us," says Gerson Sher, ISF's chief operating officer. Because of ISF's tax-free and duty-free status in the Russian Federation, he says, the only cost of the delivery program will be shipping and handling.

After preliminary talks with potential donors, Sher predicts a healthy response. "This program could end up being very large," he says.