SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE

D. NEILS/RENSSELAER FRESH WATER INST.

Under scrutiny. EPA will review earmarks such as an acid-rain study at this lake in the Adirondacks in upstate New York.

EPA Plans to Squeeze Pork 'til It Squeals

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has promised to subject every congressionally mandated pork-barrel science project that comes its way to a rigorous peer review. The move, unusual for federal agencies and unprecedented for EPA, is part of a broad effort to upgrade the quality of the agency's research programs.

Robert Huggett, the new head of EPA's Office of Research and Development, announced the initiative last week at a House science committee hearing on how academic earmarks hurt agency budgets (see p. 2004). Although EPA officials told the committee they could ill afford to spurn influential members who control the agency's budget, they said they dislike writing a check to a specific institution without being assured that the planned research projects would pass muster with experts in the field. EPA's $7.2-billion budget for 1995, awaiting final approval by the Senate, contains $32 million in academic pork.

EPA hopes a more rigorous review process, using the same standards applied to any extramural request, will turn even the most questionable earmarked projects into something of value. "We're going to look very closely at each proposal we get," Huggett told *Science*, "and we're going to reject the ones that aren't good enough. It's part of our commitment to strengthening peer review at EPA across the board." Institutions that fail the initial review would presumably have the chance to rework their proposal to meet EPA's standards.

DOD Scrambles to Fund Russian Foundation

For 2 years the Department of Defense (DOD) dragged its feet on a plan to create a federally funded but independent foundation to sponsor collaborative research between U.S. and Russian scientists. Earlier this month, DOD finally signed on to the idea, first proposed by Representative George Brown (D–CA), with Deputy Defense Secretary John Deutch telling Democratic leaders in the House and Senate that DOD plans to spend $10 million on the project. But ironically, now Congress is getting cold feet: This month the House appropriations committee denied the Pentagon's request to reprogram the money.

The U.S./Russia Research Foundation was incorporated into a 1992 law allowing DOD to spend up to $400 million for activities intended to lessen the threat from nuclear weapons in countries in the former Soviet Union. It would have created a $25-million endowment for the nonprofit foundation, from which the interest could be spent on research grants.

Last year the National Science Foundation (NSF), which would administer the grants program, drew up a proposed charter, but DOD officials were reluctant to move ahead. Now that Deutch has signaled DOD's acceptance of the idea, says one DOD official, "we're scrambling to find the money." DOD plans to ask the House panel to reconsider its rejection; if turned down, the Pentagon may dip into its 1995 budget, which is pending before Congress, to find $10 million for the foundation.

Biotech Industry Wins Concessions on GATT

Biotech and other industries have won eleventh-hour concessions from the Clinton Administration over trade legislation that could have hurt them financially by shortening the life-span of some patents.

At issue was language to implement the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), an accord intended to create a level playing field for industrial competitors around the world. GATT would set international standards for intellectual-property rights, including a provision that patents have a 20-year life from the time an application is filed with the Patent and Trademark Office (PTO). The proposal would alter current U.S. law, which allows a 17-year life on patents from time of issuance.

But the Biotechnology Industry Organization and other lobbyists objected to GATT's patent provisions. Their main beef was that the PTO often takes more than 3 years to award a patent when an invention is complicated or contentious. Under the 20-year rule, they argued, such patents would have a shorter lifetime than under current law.

Earlier this week, industry succeeded in winning several compromises. "We were sympathetic to biotech's concerns," says PTO lawyer Jeffrey Kushan, who says PTO and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative were able to change the GATT implementing language without undermining the agreement's intent. The U.S. language will, among other things, "stop the clock" on a patent's 20-year life if its validity is challenged by a third party before it is issued or if an inventor appeals a PTO decision not to award a patent. The new language is expected to affect some 4500 patents a year that are appealed, Kushan says.

"The industry is now comfortable with the language," says Lisa Raines of Genzyme Corporation. Congress is expected to vote on the GATT language next week.

PNL Plans Environmental Research on Internet

Collaboratory Logo

Although their future digs are now just a hole in the ground, environmental scientists at the Pacific Northwest Laboratory (PNL) are gearing up to launch research projects with outside colleagues anyway. Their venue: PNL's "Collaboratory," a software system being designed to allow far-flung scientists to jointly analyze data and plan experiments on the Internet.

Last July, PNL broke ground on its $230-million Environmental and Molecular Sciences Laboratory (EMSL), a facility slated to open in mid-1997 that is expected to house 270 scientists. The lab, being built adjacent to PNL's main national-lab complex in Richland, Washington, will house a broad range of projects, from designing pollution-eating enzymes to developing ways to separate radioactive isotopes from nonhazardous waste. EMSL is intended to forge collaborations with other agencies, industry, and academia.

To get joint research up and running even before EMSL opens, PNL computer specialists are devising a program that will take advantage of the Mosaic data retrieval system, teleconferencing tools, and software for remote control of lab instrumentation. According to PNL computer specialist John Price, one project that could work well in the Collaboratory is the study of molecular beams; in this case, scientists at different locales could jointly analyze molecular spectra.

PNL hopes to launch the Collaboratory, which is similar to the "BioMOO" cyberspace biology center (*Science*, 13 May, p. 900), in 6 months. Some 300 to 400 scientists on site and around the world are expected to plug in over the course of the first year, says nuclear physicist Richard Kouzes, who's spearheading the effort. For more information, contact Kouzes by e-mail at rt_kouzes@pnl.gov.