

Pork Takes Toll on Research Projects

Duke University plant ecologist Elizabeth Flint lost her job this month when the Department of Energy (DOE) terminated a decade-long research project that she had been working on. The project, run by Duke historian John Richards, had built a 120-year database on land-use changes in Southeast Asia, shedding light on how carbon fluxes have influenced global climate change. Flint, at age 43 a self-described "permanent postdoc," doesn't know why DOE pulled the plug, but she's pretty sure that the decision "has destroyed" her scientific career. "I'm looking for clerical work so I can pay the bills," she says matter-of-factly. "I can type 65 words a minute."

Flint's plight illustrates vividly a point that Representative George Brown (D-CA), chair of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, was trying to make during 2 days of hearings last week on the pernicious effects of academic earmarks—appropriations to specific institutions in a legislator's district. When these projects are stuffed into an agency's budget, something often has to be cut to accommodate them. Richards' project—and Flint's job—apparently was a direct casualty of earmarks in DOE's budget.

Brown, who has been tilting at the windmill of congressional earmarking for years, has emphasized in the past how earmarking bypasses peer review and undermines an agency's scientific priorities. The practice has continued virtually unabated, however, topping half a billion dollars in each of the last few years. This year, Brown has changed tactics, focusing attention on how earmarks jeopardize worthy projects.

His ammunition is a copy of an internal DOE memo that lists dozens of projects DOE was forced to trim, delay, or cancel to accommodate \$15.4 million in earmarks that clogged its 1994 budget. Among them were \$3.5 million in cuts to DOE's carbon dioxide program, including the cancellation of Richards' project. Other cuts

have delayed the start of a microbial genome initiative and pushed back by at least a year the installation of a second site for the department's Atmospheric Radiation Measurement (ARM) project, a top priority of the \$1.5-billion Global Change Research Project that spans a dozen federal agencies. The DOE memo makes clear the reason for the cuts: It notes, for example, that \$140,000 intended for individual research projects in molecular biology that "met the criteria for scientific merit and programmatic relevance" was used instead "to fund the congressional earmark."

Brown hoped that this specific evidence of damage would lead government officials testifying at last week's hearing to complain about the adverse effect of the earmarks on their research priorities.

In particular, Brown was hoping for support in persuading the Clinton Administration to tell agency heads to ignore the earmarks because they appear in nonbinding report language that accompanies each appropriations bill. Instead, what Brown heard were mild condemnations of the practice, but meek acceptance of their inevitability. "The department is opposed to academic earmarks," said Martha Krebs, head of DOE's Office of Energy Research. "They have adversely affected the department's research agenda ... and the benefits derived are limited." However, Krebs went on to say that "it is

the policy of the department in executing appropriations to comply with guidance from Congress, whether mandated by law or requested in report language."

Government officials like Krebs are in a difficult position. They are loath to anta-



ARMed and ready. Radiometers at the Oklahoma site of the Atmospheric Radiation Measurement project. Installation of a second site has been delayed by a year.

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gonize those who control their purse strings, no matter how much they dislike earmarking. More puzzling, however, is the silence of researchers whose research has been cut. Why don't they complain? One answer is that many of them are unaware that their projects were sacrificed to earmarks: Several researchers whose projects have felt the axe say DOE officials never told them the real reason for their loss of funding. "In January, when I got the word that we weren't going to get renewed," says Richards, "I was surprised, but I figured that's the way the ball bounces. We'd had a good run."

Another member of the group effort, University of Illinois professor of forestry Sandra Brown, says she "never got a clear answer" to her queries about why DOE was eliminating work that she says was "way ahead" of what anybody else was doing in mapping and modeling the effects of human activity on large areas in the tropics.

DOE's actions are no mystery to Pennsylvania State University meteorologist Thomas Ackerman, who was planning to be in Papua New Guinea this month to install equipment for the second of three ARM sites—until funding was curtailed. Last fall, after funding cuts forced the cancellation of two other primary sites, Ackerman met with DOE program officials in suburban Maryland to plot the future of ARM, and it was there that he learned what was really going on. "DOE is afraid that if it doesn't accept the [earmarked] money, next year the appropriations committee will cut its entire budget," he says. "They say it's not worth taking the risk for the sake of a particular earmark."

Officially, Krebs and her counterpart at the Environmental Protection Agency, Robert Huggert, deny that such fears are a factor in their decisions. In a telephone interview after the hearing, Krebs also defended the practice of not informing researchers why their projects were cut. She said the list "was intended for internal use only" and that the department "has no obligation to tell researchers that you would have been funded at X but that we had to cut you to accommodate an earmark." And Krebs said she expects to follow a similar procedure next year to accommodate the millions of dollars in earmarks in DOE's 1995 budget.

That's no comfort to Flint. "I wish I had a powerful congressman in my district," she says. "Maybe then I'd still have a job."

—Jeffrey Mervis



Cut loose. Elizabeth Flint in southern India. Her project on land-use changes in Southeast Asia has been killed.