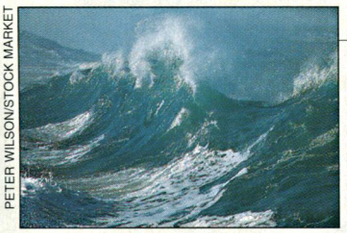
SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE



PETER WILSON/STOCK MARKET

Troubled waters. A new report calls on EPA to tackle future problems, such as ocean health.

Report Calls for a Visionary EPA

Like many a surgeon, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is usually out to fix mistakes, not prevent them. But that approach falls short, the agency's Science Advisory Board (SAB) argues in a report to be released in December. "Beyond the horizon: protecting the future with foresight" calls on EPA to develop methods to foresee future threats and nip them in the bud.

Departing from its traditional cleanup cop role, EPA in the last few years has begun to help industries develop pollution-prevention strategies. But agency officials want a broader mandate "to focus more on environmental problems of the future and not so much on those of the past and present," says one official.

Heeding this desire, an SAB committee chaired by University of Texas environmental engineer Raymond Loehr recommends that EPA "play a different, and broader, role than it has played in the past" by responding to anticipated problems. Every year, the panel says, EPA should issue a report describing "likely environmental conditions 20 years into the future." The panel says such a report could drive EPA research and data-collection efforts.

Although the panel found no "crystal ball" to foresee risks, says SAB director Donald Barnes, it does offer methods to evaluate future threats based on such criteria as when a problem might emerge and how it may arouse public concern. As a surprise to few scientists, perhaps, the SAB's highest ranking future risks include biodiversity loss, noncancer effects of pollutants, and the ecological health of the oceans.

DOD to Cut Big Bucks From Campus Research

Universities that receive funding from the Defense Department (DOD) are starting the 1995 fiscal year, which began on 1 October, under a cloud. Last week Congress slashed $200 million from DOD's funds for academic research, but it is likely to be weeks before DOD officials have decided which programs to cut.

The Advanced Research Projects Agency and other defense-wide programs took the biggest hit, losing $86 million. Other cuts were: the Navy, $62 million; the Air Force, $19 million; and the Army, $14 million. Another $19-million cut will be levied on DOD's campus-based labs.

As painful as these cuts are, university officials can take solace they weren't deeper. In June the House approved a $900-million cut—about half of DOD's annual spending on campus—saying the money was needed to keep troops ready for battle (*Science*, 1 July, p. 22). But the Senate voted for a $150-million reduction, setting the stage for last month's compromise. Congress has also asked the Pentagon for a report on the $500 million a year spent on overhead charges—indirect costs—to universities to support DOD-funded research.

Failing Peer Review, School Gets Pork Funds

Last week brought a real-life example of something critics of congressional earmarks have long suspected: a pork-barrel project—a grant inserted by a legislator to benefit constituents—that had wilted under the glare of rigorous peer review.

The case involves efforts by the College of Notre Dame of Maryland to obtain federal funds to renovate its Knott Science Center. In April, the school requested $500,000 for the center from the merit-based research infrastructure program run by the National Science Foundation (NSF). But on 27 September, when NSF announced the latest round of 70 grants totaling $52.5 million, Notre Dame wasn't on the list.

Notre Dame officials were disappointed at flunking peer review—but only fleetingly. That same day, the Senate passed an appropriations bill that provides the school's Knott Center with nearly three times the NSF request. The money comes courtesy of Senator Barbara Mikulski (D–MD), who earmarked $1.45 million for the center last month.

What would Notre Dame have done if both NSF and Congress had funded the project? A school official didn't know which one would have been refused. "But it would be a lovely problem to have," she says.

Israel May Become EU Research Partner

Israeli scientists may soon be reaping dividends for their country's participation in the ongoing Mideast peace process. Last week, research ministers from the 12 European Union (EU) nations rewarded Israel's steps toward peace by asking the union's executive body, the European Commission, to begin negotiations aimed at making Israel the first non-European member of the EU's research programs.

Israel's contribution would be based on the same Gross Domestic Product–related formula that defines contributions from each of the union's member states. This formula would require a down payment of some $30 million a year, about 1% of the total cost of eligible EU programs. In return, Israeli scientists could apply for EU grants in the same way as union researchers. The only activity off-limits to Israel would be the EU's nuclear programs.

Israeli officials are delighted by the prospect. "Scientifically, Israel already thinks of itself at the heart of Europe," says Michael Wolff, head of international relations in the Israeli science ministry. Sources at the European Commission say they hope to get the deal ratified within a year.

ORI, FASEB Feud Over New Rules

A battle is brewing between the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) over rules to protect whistleblowers and release information about ongoing investigations.

Last July ORI, an investigative branch of the Department of Health and Human Services, published a rule that would protect the identity of whistleblowers during its investigations. In addition, ORI published 12 proposed instances in which it would disclose information: for example, to institutions conducting concurrent misconduct inquiries, to journal editors to correct "inaccurate or misleading research results," or to news media if a misconduct allegation becomes a "public dispute." The regs were prompted in part by the public furor over the delay last year in publicizing details about fraud in a breast cancer clinical trial (*Science*, 25 March, p. 1679).

But FASEB saw potential harm to its scientists lurking behind the rules' good intent. In a letter to ORI on 26 August, FASEB President Samuel Silverstein stated that "many of the proposed disclosures constitute a travesty." FASEB was particularly upset by ORI's intention to correct results deemed inaccurate because of fraud. "ORI has neither the capability nor the jurisdiction to deal with such matters," he said. And in a 12 September letter, Silverstein blasted the whistleblower rule, arguing that the provision would prevent scientists accused of misconduct from challenging their accusers' veracity. Silverstein says ORI should withdraw the rules. "The only thing a scientist has is his good reputation," he told *Science*.

ORI Director Lyle Bivens says the office "will certainly listen closely to what FASEB has to say." One ORI lawyer says the office plans only to refine the rules, which are expected to reappear later this fall.