

USDA Science Suffers From Political Casualty

A plant pathologist nominated for the top science post at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has withdrawn from consideration, keeping in limbo new agency-sponsored research initiatives at the nation's land-grant universities.

Texas A and M University's José Amador, President Clinton's pick to run USDA's Science and Education division, said in a statement that he has stepped aside for health and family reasons. But other events clouded his nomination. Although the Senate held confirmation hearings in August, a fi-



José Amador

nal vote on Amador and several other USDA nominees was blocked by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC). Helms had informed then-USDA Secretary Mike Espy that he would release the holds only after Espy reinstated a USDA employee transferred after publicly opposing benefits for partners of gay employees. Espy did reinstate the employee—but only after Amador had bailed out.

Perhaps the biggest losers will be schools that receive money from the science office, which spends about \$1.1 billion a year on research. While established programs should continue unperturbed, the office's lack of

leadership has delayed some new initiatives, says Kenneth Farrell, vice president for agriculture and natural resources for the University of California (UC) system. For instance, he says, UC has postponed submitting grant applications to USDA for "basic studies that need to be done" on how environmental regulations affect agricultural production. The reason: USDA's science office has yet to articulate a "clear set of priorities" for such research, Farrell says.

Earlier this week Amador returned to his position as director of Texas A and M's Weslaco research center. As for the next USDA science nominee, a spokesperson says the agency has begun trolling for candidates.

Again, Army Shuns AIDS Peer Review

To the delight of AIDS researchers, the Department of Defense (DOD) last winter decided to spend \$20 million on peer-reviewed research rather than a congressionally earmarked AIDS vaccine test. But some researchers aren't so happy anymore: DOD now plans to spend half the money on a project that bypassed the peer-review system.

Last year, the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration criticized DOD's plan to spend \$20 million to test a therapeutic AIDS vaccine made by Connecticut's MicroGeneSys Inc., which had lobbied to get the original appropriation (*Science*, 16 April 1993, p. 288). DOD eventually bowed to pressure from the agencies; in a letter to Congress last January, a top DOD official promised to spend the money on peer-reviewed research. Indeed, the Pentagon says it does plan to spend \$9.6 million on AIDS vaccine research by five research teams whose proposals passed the Army's peer review.

But DOD has at least partly changed its mind. Earlier this week, Army officials told *Science* that DOD also planned to award \$10.3 million to the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, a private contractor in Maryland.

The move has angered the chair of the Army's AIDS peer-review committee, biochemist John Moore of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center. "What the DOD does not seem to have understood is that the fuss over the original \$20 million was largely about an abuse of the peer-review system," says Moore. "Now it looks like we're facing another one."

Neal Boswell, deputy director of the military's AIDS research program, says his command works as a team with the Jackson foundation and that the money was put there to prevent a potential shortfall in DOD's AIDS research budget for next year.

Ukrainians Seek Cash, Companions for Voyage

For a tourist looking for a pleasure cruise, a \$16,000 ticket for a ride on a Ukrainian research vessel may sound like a scam, or just plain dreary. But the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (UAS), which is hoping to sell seats on a 4-month globe-trotting biology expedition, is pitching its cruise to a different clientele: Western scientists.

Biologists in the former Soviet Union (FSU) have gained renown in the past century for collecting valuable samples of flora and fauna, the germplasm of which has been stored mainly at the Vavilov Institute in St. Petersburg. But with the

Soviet Union's demise, Ukrainian biologists no longer have to funnel their samples to the Vavilov; their goal now is to stock Ukraine's Botanical Museums and Gardens in Kiev.

That's one reason why some 50 scientists from Ukraine, Russia, and Western Europe are planning an expedition to gather samples in the Atlantic and Indian oceans and the Mediterranean Sea (see map). Set to begin in late February in Sevastopol, Russia, the voyage will be the 43rd of its kind



Itinerary for sale. Ukrainian biologists are seeking Western cash and scientists for an expedition to leave Sevastopol in February.

aboard Ukraine's "Academician Vernadsky," named after UAS's first president.

But Ukrainian scientists, like many others in the FSU, are hurting for cash and must finance their expedition in part from Western sources. Organizers are looking for 25 extra passengers, who would each pay \$11,000 for a billet and \$5000 to underwrite an FSU scientist. "We've had a lot of interest from scientists so far, but nobody has committed yet," says U.S.-based organizer Tanya Puchkova, a biologist at Kirtland Community College in Roscommon, Michigan.

Countdown to PCAST Meeting

A few numbers for science policy wonks to consider:

- **Years** since Bill Clinton was elected president: 1.9
- **Months** since President's Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology (PCAST) was created: 11
- **Weeks** since PCAST members were announced: 10
- **Days** to first PCAST meeting: 11

Yes, the inaugural meeting of the 19-member committee of prominent scientists charged with advising the president on scientific issues (*Science*, 17 September 1993, p. 1513) is scheduled for 25 to 26 October in Washington, D.C. The agenda for the long-awaited meeting is still being worked on, but White House officials say the panel will meet with the president and get briefed on the new National Science and Technology Council. Most of the meeting will be open to the public. For more information, call (202) 456-6100.