SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE

House Republicans Promise Science Cuts

If Republicans gain control of the House after next month's elections, expect a tussle over the budgets of several science agencies. Last month, the Republican National Committee released a "Contract with America," a collection of 10 bills that Republicans have pledged to introduce next year to combat crime, create jobs, and generate $148 billion in tax breaks. To pay for the plan, the committee offers $176 billion in spending cuts, including $11.2 billion in science programs.

At the top of the hit list are the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program (ATP) and the Interior Department's Geological Survey and Biological Survey, all of which would be eliminated for an estimated 5-year savings of $4.22 billion. The plan would also limit growth of the National Science Foundation's budget to 1% less than the inflation rate (saving $350 million over 5 years) and hold reimbursement of academic research overhead to 46 cents on the dollar (saving $1.62 billion). Other areas targeted for cuts are energy research ($2.14 billion), high-performance computing ($1.23 billion), agricultural research ($830 million), and several National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration programs ($805 million). Much of this research "can be done in the private sector," says Barry Jackson, a spokesperson for the Republican National Committee.

GENPHARM INTERNATIONAL INC.

Political casualty? Republicans have threatened to ax the ATP, which funds such projects as transgenic mouse work at GenPharm.

Jackson acknowledges that "none of these things are necessarily going to happen" in the 1996 budget. Most of the items came from proposals sponsored by House Republicans and rejected by Democrats in the past 2 years. But if the House changes hands, Republicans would be in a stronger position to pursue them.

FAO to Maintain Plant Germplasm Bank

A global effort to safeguard and provide easier access to plant genetic resources will soon have a new champion. Earlier this week, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), a consortium of 18 research centers, was expected to make its vast collection of plant germplasm samples part of a broader network overseen by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In 1993 CGIAR announced it would make its 500,000 samples of germplasm, used to breed better crops, part of an FAO program to preserve germplasm. Last May, however, CGIAR backed off the plan, saying it had to review the impact on property rights of joining the network. The move provoked criticism from some nongovernmental organizations, which claimed that the World Bank, one of CGIAR's sponsors, had nixed the deal in order to profit from the commercially valuable germplasm (*Science*, 8 July, p. 181).

But the dispute is now over. The new agreement calls for CGIAR to maintain its samples—about 40% of the world's stock—and for FAO to act as an international arbiter to ensure that the germplasm is distributed fairly, says Geoffrey Hawtin, director of the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources, a CGIAR center based in Rome.

One unresolved issue is how developing countries will collect royalties on the use of germplasm, which they now own under the biodiversity treaty. Next month FAO plans to begin a 2-year negotiation process to determine how to distribute royalties.

PHS to Redo Rule on Conflict of Interest

In response to criticism from the scientific community, the Public Health Service (PHS) is expected to ease new guidelines designed to require federally funded scientists to disclose conflicts of interest.

In 1989, PHS first published a rule that would require researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other PHS agencies to disclose all their financial holdings to their institution. After the scientific community assailed the rule as too harsh, PHS went back to the drawing board. Last June, the agency published a revised rule limiting disclosure to holdings worth more than $5000 or more than 5% ownership in a company; the scientific community praised these provisions (*Science*, 8 July, p. 179).

But after the initial enthusiasm faded last summer, the scientific community again took to the warpath. Some institutions claimed that enforcing the rule would cost far more than the annual $1000 per institution that PHS had estimated. In a 24 August letter, University of California, San Francisco, officials said the compliance cost would run UCSF between $48,000 and $164,000 a year, depending on the number of disclosures requiring close scrutiny. UCSF officials suggested that PHS either increase its support of UCSF's administrative costs or raise the disclosure threshold to $10,000.

PHS appears ready to give ground on some points. *Science* has learned that NIH has asked PHS to require review of grantees only, rather than all applicants. PHS may also raise the disclosure threshold to as high as $10,000, says an NIH official, who says such measures would greatly reduce costs.

European Commission Seeks Greater Role

With a research budget of more than $2 billion a year, the European Commission—the executive arm of the European Union (EU)—is already a major player in European science policy. But now the commission appears to be seeking even more influence, as indicated by a policy paper it released last week. Already, the paper is triggering a backlash.

The commission argues in its paper that it should play a leading role in improving coordination among the national research programs of the EU's members. To achieve this, the commission wants a role in overseeing exchange of information throughout Europe about national research efforts; it also argues that national agencies should allow scientists from other EU countries to participate in their research efforts. In addition, the commission aims to create programs, in areas such as aerodynamics and primate models for AIDS research, that would be run by the commission but funded largely by EU members that choose to take part.

EU members that spend little on research, such as Ireland and Portugal, are expected to embrace the proposals. But officials of big-spending nations such as Britain and Germany—while backing the moves to increase information exchange—are wary of the rest of the document, which they say may give the commission too much control over national research agencies.

Nevertheless, the new document can't be rejected outright: The EU states have already endorsed greater research coordination under the Maastricht Treaty, which transformed the European Community into the EU. The proposals are consistent with other EU initiatives, says EU research commissioner Antonio Ruberti. "If Europe is thinking about a common security policy and a common foreign policy," he says, "why should it not do the same in research?"