

Technology Assessment Faces Ax

Congress's Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) may be an early victim of the new Republican majority's efforts to cut spending and shrink government. Last week, Republican senators endorsed a recommendation that OTA be abolished, a move that would save \$22 million a year. The proposal, which took OTA officials by surprise, was drafted by a task force led by Senators Pete Domenici (R-NM) and Connie Mack (R-FL).

Eliminating OTA is part of a package of proposed cuts that would trim the Congressional General Accounting Office by 25% and also reduce the size of senators' personal and committee staffs. Similar proposals are being discussed in the House, along with plans to drop three of 23 current House committees. Although a final decision may not come for months, the threat to OTA is serious, say political observers.

OTA was created in 1972 to give Congress an independent capacity to judge technology proposals from the executive branch, and its 202-member staff draws on outside experts for reports on topics ranging from science education to remote sensing. Its early work was often criticized as partisan, but it developed a reputation for impartiality under John Gibbons, who served as its director for 13 years before becoming science adviser to President Clinton. Indeed, although OTA

reports on the Strategic Defense Initiative and prospects for monitoring a comprehensive test ban were influential in congressional debates on those contentious issues, the new attacks on OTA appear to be driven more by pragmatism than ideology.

"Like all congressional staff, they are helpful," says Eric Ueland, press secretary to the Senate Republican Policy Committee. "The problem is that they are redundant and irrelevant to the decisions that members have to make. A lot of their duties could probably be picked up by the Congressional Research Service [CRS]," which has a larger budget and staff.

Not every Republican agrees with that assessment. In January 1993, Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) wrote in the agency's annual report that OTA "provides members with very good technical analysis and accurate facts critical to making good law. ... It has emerged as a key source of objective data."

Another supporter is Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY), who next month is scheduled to become chair of the 12-member, bipartisan congressional panel that oversees OTA. "This group does unique work that can't be done elsewhere," says a Houghton aide, Brian Fitzpatrick. "Its track record is good, and the board works hard to keep



its reports bipartisan."

On the other side of the aisle, Representative George Brown (D-CA) calls the Republican proposal "ridiculous," adding that opposition "comes from people who are not directly involved [in the issues OTA addresses] and haven't benefited from the excellent analysis it provides." He said OTA's policy of responding only to requests from committee chairs and ranking minority members has limited its base of support, while CRS "has generated a mass audience" by acting on requests from individual members.

In fact, OTA's professional detachment could be part of its problem, says Harvard University's Lewis Branscomb, a member of OTA's scientific advisory council. "OTA tries so desperately not to be political that it risks becoming invisible," he says. "But now that it's threatened, I hope the scientific community can get people stirred up to support it."

Any proposal to eliminate the agency would first go to the Rules Committee in both houses, then to the appropriations subcommittee that oversees spending for the activities of Congress. In the Senate, that panel is chaired by Mack, who has already endorsed OTA's execution. And OTA's prospects may be even worse in the House, where Speaker-elect Newt Gingrich (R-GA) favors steep cuts in the overall operating budget of Congress.

—Jeffrey Mervis

SCIENTIFIC MEETINGS

Dahlem Conferences' Future in Doubt

BERLIN—For the past 20 years, the prestigious Dahlem conferences have drawn many of the world's leading scientists to this city for focused workshops on specific areas of research. In 1984, Berlin mayor Eberhard Diepgen called the conferences "one of the central pillars" of the city's scientific reputation. Now, however, the Dahlem conferences may become a victim of Germany's post-unification economic squeeze: Late last month, Diepgen and Berlin's city council decided to end the funding that has kept the conferences going since 1990.

The council's move puts the Free University of Berlin, which has administered the conferences for the past 4 years, in a financial dilemma. University officials, faced with serious reductions in their own overall budget, must now decide whether they can afford even a scaled-back version of Dahlem. "We are in a terrible situation," says Konrad Seppelt, the Free University's vice president for science and research. "Everyone agrees that the Dahlem conferences are excellent. But now we must either sharply reduce the number of conferences or stop the whole thing."

The Dahlem conferences, named after the area of Berlin where they are held, were founded in 1974 by the industry-supported Donors' Association for the Promotion of Sciences and the Humanities, in cooperation with the German Science Foundation. Initially, the donors' association covered most costs, and four conferences were held a year. But the association, which normally only provides seed money for new ventures, withdrew its funding in 1990, and the Free University took over running the meetings with subsidies from the Berlin city council. Those subsidies have slowly been eaten away, declining from \$765,000 to \$320,000. This year only three meetings were held, on the impact of aerosols on climate, molecular aspects of aging, and the influence of upwelling ocean currents on climate.

Free University chemist Klaus Roth, who directs the conferences, sought help earlier this year from more than 200 leading scientists, asking them to try to persuade the city government not to withdraw its support. So far 150 former participants in the workshops have written to Diepgen. Masao Ito, presi-

dent of the Science Council of Japan, wrote that Dahlem's "value to worldwide academic communities is immeasurable. Discontinuation of its activities would be a great loss." Genetic pathologist George M. Martin of the University of Washington, Seattle, said that Dahlem has played "a remarkable role as an interdisciplinary vehicle for the rapid diffusion of knowledge among the international community of researchers and educators."

The scientists' pleas fell on deaf ears, however. This fall, an aide to the mayor wrote to the scientists that the subsidies had become a casualty of "the budget situation" following unification. Next year's conferences are now in doubt, although organizers have already sent out about 40 invitations to a planned conference in May on the biochemical and behavioral regulation mechanisms of body weight. Seppelt says the university would be loath to cancel the meeting. "Most likely, we will start reducing the number of conferences and asking more scientists to pay some of the costs," he says. "But in the long run, we need to find a more permanent solution."

—Robert Koenig

Robert Koenig is a journalist in Berlin.