

community that some researchers have said they will not compete for the new grant. And any abstentions of this type could severely restrict the field of contenders: By most estimates only five or six labs in the United States are capable of finishing the *E. coli* project. "There are not very many of us," says Craig Venter, scientific director of The Institute for Genomic Research in Gaithersburg, Maryland, "and to cut one of the pioneer labs off at the roots when he was doing a very high-quality job, on a very important project, is not something that we like to see." Venter, who also signed Roberts' let-

ter, says his group is not going to apply for the grant "out of respect for Blattner's work."

One lab that will apply is Blattner's. Blattner, who says he is "heartwarmed" by the letters and petitions, says he will also seek outside funding to support an annotation effort as well as needed technological improvements. At least one company, Genome Therapeutics Corp. (GTC) of Waltham, Massachusetts, also intends to apply. Gerald Vovis, GTC vice president for research, claims that in terms of being able to keep up with technology, stick to goals, and produce sequence fast, "industry has an advantage over academia."

The dispute over the *E. coli* project may foreshadow other tough funding decisions and how big-science sequencing will get done as NCHGR shifts funds into the effort to sequence the massive 3-billion-base-pair human genome. "Funding is going to get very tough," predicts Stanford University geneticist Ronald Davis, who says he has sent in a letter of intent to apply for the *E. coli* grant but may bow out because of the uproar in the community. "You will not only have to do something well; you will also have to do it very cost-effectively," says Davis.

—Antonio Regalado

## SCIENCE AND THE NEW CONGRESS

# Agency Merger Plan Faces High Hurdles

Representative Robert Walker (R-PA), the new chair of the House Science Committee, intends to introduce legislation next month combining most of the government's non-medical civilian research into a single Department of Science. Walker believes the move, which has tacit backing from House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), would boost the field's power and prestige while lowering costs (*Science*, 17 March, p. 1587). But the plan is already getting poor reviews from the research community, and it may not go far enough for freshmen lawmakers intent on more radical cuts, say congressional aides.

The new department, according to a draft version of the bill obtained by *Science*, would include four complete agencies—the current Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and National Science Foundation (NSF)—five science-related organizations in the Commerce Department, and the Interior Department's U.S. Geological Survey (see table). The massive new department would be split into five areas—research, technology, energy, space, and the environment—each headed by an undersecretary who would report to the Secretary of Science. The consolidation would eliminate 5000 jobs from a current work force of about 78,000 at those agencies, House staffers say. It would also abolish the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) led by presidential science adviser John Gibbons.

Gibbons, not surprisingly, is unenthusiastic—he says the National Science and Technology Council, run by his office, already provides such coordination. But the science adviser struck a conciliatory note this week by saying that the council may need to be strengthened and that Walker's proposal

"bears a lot of discussion."

Past proposals to create a Department of Science have been nonstarters, in part because of "the unfortunately bad feedback we get from the scientific community," says Representative George Brown (D-CA), ranking minority member of the science panel. Each bureaucracy and discipline fiercely defends its turf, notes Brown, who says he "will be very cautious" before backing Walker's legislation.

Part of the opposition comes from a fear that a single department would be more vulnerable to budget cutters than the current lineup of agencies. "It's a bad idea," says Erich Bloch, former NSF director, now at the private Council on Competitiveness in Washington. "It would mean too many eggs in one basket; it would be one big target."

Research administrators also reject the argument that consolidation would save money. "[The idea] is the figment of someone's imagination," says Kumar Patel, the president of the American Physical Society and a physicist at the University of California, Los Angeles. While a single department could boost the prestige of science, he says, "the downside risks are too high." Pulling

science out of mission agencies could weaken its contribution to the U.S. economy, he says, and having separate sources of funding "has allowed us to progress rapidly in several different fields."

Although Walker's proposed department wouldn't include the National Institutes of Health, biomedical researchers see a downside for their discipline, too: By scrapping OSTP, the proposal would leave them without an obvious advocate in the White House. "We feel strongly that it's important to have a public policy voice on biomedical research in OSTP," says Frankie Trull, president of the National Association for Biomedical Research. There will also likely be debate over just how much would be saved. A veteran staffer notes, for example, that the bill does not take into account the high cost of consolidating the agencies.

Whatever savings are calculated may not be enough for some budget-cutters, however. Freshmen Representatives Todd Tiahrt (R-KS) and Sam Brownback (R-KS) plan to introduce a bill by May that sets forth their blueprint for a streamlined government. "No one is sure what the end result will be, but it could well be we propose eliminating agencies rather than simply replacing them" with a new organization, says Brownback's press secretary, Jackie McClaskey.

Says Walker: "We're in the process of talking."

Few in the science community question Walker's motives in pushing for a streamlined new department. But many are worried that his colleagues, who do not necessarily share his interest in science and have pledged to lower spending, might use his proposal as a vehicle for a more radical downsizing of science. Says one congressional aide: "The obvious question is whether this is all a smoke screen to kill programs."

—Andrew Lawler

### ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY?

Agency	Personnel	1995 Budget
Department of Energy	20,000	\$17.5 billion
National Aeronautics and Space Admin.	23,000	\$14.4 billion
Environmental Protection Agency	14,000	\$7.2 billion
National Science Foundation	1,221	\$3.4 billion
U.S. Geological Survey (Interior)	2,768	\$571 million
Commerce Department:		
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Admin.	13,000	\$1.9 billion
National Institute of Standards and Technology	2,000	\$855 million
Patent and Trademark Office	914	\$82 million
National Technical Information Service	378	\$78 million
National Telecommunications & Information Admin.	378	\$30 million

SOURCE: OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET