SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE

Funeral Director?

Talk about an icy welcome. Two weeks ago Lura Powell took the reins as the new director of the Advanced Technology Program (ATP), which promotes industrial research on risky but potentially lucrative technologies. But instead of sending her its best wishes, the House Appropriations Committee last week voted to eliminate the program's $341 million budget.

The vote took few observers by surprise. Republicans have long viewed ATP—a key plank in the White House's R&D platform—as corporate welfare.

Powell insists she's not the captain of a sinking *Titanic*. "I feel confident that in the end [of the appropriations process] we will have some level of funding," she says. One reason Powell takes a sanguine view, she says, is that ATP received support in an 18 July memo from Alice Rivlin, director of the Administration's Office of Management and Budget, to House Appropriations Chair Bob Livingston (R–LA). The memo lists ATP among the programs that, if eliminated from the final appropriations bill, could prompt a presidential veto.

"Call me an eternal optimist," says Powell, who says ATP is "truly an outstanding program." She has a chance to get her message across when the Senate takes up the Commerce Department's budget request, which includes ATP, later this year. Judging by the Republicans' response thus far, however, Powell's is an optimistic notion indeed.

OTA on the Ropes

The saga of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) took a new twist last week, when the Senate voted to kill this policy shop that reports to Congress on science and technology issues.

OTA's fate has hung in the balance for weeks, as lawmakers have waffled over whether to save or deep-six it. Last month, the House reversed an earlier vote and narrowly approved a plan to preserve OTA by transferring it to the Library of Congress (LoC).

Last week the tables turned again when the Senate zeroed out funding for OTA in a $2.2 billion 1996 appropriations bill for the legislative branch. The Senate rejected a bipartisan effort led by Ernest Hollings (D–SC) to transfer OTA and other agencies to the LoC.

The OTA will twist in the wind until September, when House and Senate members iron out a final appropriations bill to send to President Clinton.

House Slams Interior

Research on everything from zebra mussels to ceramics took a blow last week when the House passed a $525 million R&D budget for the Interior Department in 1996, a 24% cut from 1995.

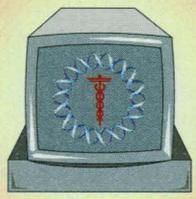
The big losers are the National Biological Service (NBS) and the Bureau of Mines (BoM), both of which are eliminated in the appropriations bill. According to the bill, the private sector would have to pick up BoM's R&D activities ($103 million in 1995), such as the development of new mineral extraction techniques. "We would have to put about 1900 people on the street between Thanksgiving and Christmas," says BoM's David Brown—about 20% of them scientists.

Interior's biological science would suffer too. NBS activities, such as studies on wildlife health and exotic species, would become a division of "natural resources research" at the U.S. Geological Survey. The bill calls for a natural resources budget of $113 million in 1996, down from NBS's $167 million budget in 1995. A cut this large, says NBS Director Ron Pulliam, would "devastate" Interior's biology capabilities.

The Senate was expected to begin debating its appropriations bill for Interior earlier this week and to vote on it by August recess.

Gene Therapy Data Bank Stuck at Starting Gate

A state-of-the-art data bank for gene therapy has fallen victim to a rift between the two agencies that were expected to sponsor it—the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Office of Recombinant DNA Activities (ORDA) at the National Institutes of Health.



The plan for the $500,000 data bank calls for gathering clinical data on the new field of gene therapy, which has grown to include 600 patients. The data bank would be a pilot project for a much grander idea at FDA: a "smart technologies" system, budgeted tentatively to receive $25 million over 7 years, that would capture data from clinical trials in FDA's jurisdiction and provide up-to-the-minute information to reviewers and patients.

The concept, however, is in limbo as tensions between ORDA and FDA escalate over the gene therapy project. At a meeting of the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) in June, Philip Noguchi, an FDA scientist who proposed the data bank, noted that he has "taken a lot of heat" from his superiors for suggesting that FDA funds be used on a pilot project that would initially benefit another agency—ORDA. He has asked ORDA Director Nelson Wivel to sign a memo launching a joint effort, but that hasn't happened. Wivel has indicated that ORDA is weighing the proposal, but said in June that the data bank's estimated cost—$1000 per patient—"seems expensive." Wivel also noted that the project's future "depends on what kind of budget we can come up with"—and no budget has been finalized.

Noguchi, meanwhile, says he is "ticked off" by the lack of progress. He hopes to save the data bank, however, by eliciting interest through a demonstration of its capabilities at the December RAC meeting.

NCI Chief

It's official: Richard Klausner—long considered the top candidate for director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI)—received the formal nod from the White House this week. Klausner, a member of the National Academy of Sciences and an intramural scientist at the National Institutes of Health since 1979, takes charge of NCI without further ado.

Swedish Budget Woes Squeeze Top Institute

It may only be July, but the climate in Sweden has already turned decidedly chilly—the research climate, that is. Sweden's new government is slashing its payments to universities, forcing schools such as the famed Karolinska Institute to take stock of their research programs.

Stockholm's Karolinska is renowned for tapping the winner of the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine each year and for conducting research in everything from biochemistry to endocrinology. But its $250 million annual budget is about to get cut. Sweden's deficit-strapped socialist government, which came to power in September 1994, plans to reduce its $85 million contribution to Karolinska by 10% to 15% by the end of 1997.

Such is the brutal welcome for Karolinska's new president, immunologist Hans Wigzell. "I told [the institute] I would consider harsh maneuvers, and [it] picked me anyway," says Wigzell, who took office on 1 July.

Wigzell declined to reveal specifics of his plan. One of his first tasks, however, will likely be to look for ways to consolidate departments, staffers say. To its advantage, Karolinska has expanded its budget in recent years with research funds from such sources as the European Union and the Swedish companies Pharmacia and Astra. "I expect the stronger research groups will be able to compensate with these other sources," says neuroscience department chair Sten Grillner.

But weaker departments may wither. "Certainly people are worried," Grillner says.