

edited by RICHARD STONE

## Fusion Fine Print

What seemed like a big victory for fusion advocates on the Senate floor last week in fact was not. Lawmakers approved an amendment that would allow Department of Energy (DOE) officials to channel \$56 million into continued operation of the Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor (TFTR) at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, which is slated to close on 1 October. The catch is that DOE must find the money from nebulous departmental savings—and not from other programs.

Dale Meade, deputy director of the Princeton lab, says he's confident DOE will pony up funds to keep TFTR running. But DOE fusion chief Anne Davies demurs. Given DOE's budget cuts, "It would be very difficult for the department to find the money," she says.

## NSF Seeks to Improve Peer Review

With a little help from the scientific community, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is now seeking ways to improve its peer review of grant proposals.

The review is prompted in part by a report last fall from the General Accounting Office (GAO) that concluded that NSF should take extra steps to ensure fairness in its peer review system. The report found that the system generally works well. However, GAO said NSF should increase the use of outside review panels, monitor more closely the proportion of women and minorities among reviewers, and improve its system for calibrating ratings among reviewers.

In the wake of the GAO report, NSF determined that the

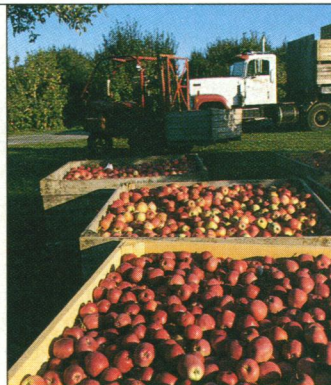
system "doesn't need an overhaul," says NSF deputy director Anne Petersen. Rather, she says, NSF wants to fine-tune the process, with revisions beginning next spring. A lean NSF budget (see p. 748) instills a measure of urgency in any reform effort, Petersen says. "Tighter funds will challenge the system. We want to be very careful in our decisions, because more people will have to be turned down," she says.

NSF plans two forums for discussing reform proposals: a small powwow for high-ranking university officials in September and a larger forum for outside scientists next spring. Scientists with ideas for improving peer review at NSF can help set the agenda by sending e-mail comments to [proprev@nsf.gov](mailto:proprev@nsf.gov).

## House Prunes USDA Research Budget

Eleventh-hour cuts and earmarks in the House bill for the Department of Agriculture (USDA) may prevent the agency from awarding more than 60 peer-reviewed grants next year in areas such as plant biology and pest control.

House budgeteers targeted USDA's National Research Initiative (NRI) competitive grants program, funded to the tune of \$103 million in 1995. The White House requested \$130 million for NRI in 1996, but the House-passed bill gives NRI only \$98 million next year. The bill would eliminate programs totalling \$8



**Bitter harvest.** Fighting apple pests is one project at risk in House bill.

million in three areas—water quality, integrated pest management, and pesticide assessment—that were created in 1995 "to help NRI be more mission-oriented," says NRI's Sally Rockey. Such cuts, she says, would force NRI to fund only 210 grants in natural resources and pest control next year, 60 fewer than planned.

Earmarks as well blighted NRI's budget. Last month, an amendment from Representative Dave Camp (R-MI) transferred \$445,000 from NRI to a sustainable agriculture program at Michigan State. A second amendment from Representative Joe Skeen (R-NM) siphoned \$200,000 from NRI to USDA's new Office of Risk Assessment. Together, the earmarks would result in about seven fewer grants in plant biology, says Rockey. The Senate, which traditionally follows the House lead on agriculture appropriations, will take up USDA's budget next month.

## House Jackhammers Transportation R&D

For a federal agency that brings to mind asphalt and Amtrak, the Department of Transportation (DOT) does a surprising amount of research—\$947 million in 1995, on everything from bomb detection to aviation communications. But DOT research is poised to take a nosedive. Last month, the House passed an appropriations bill that would give DOT \$703 million for research in 1996, 36% less than the president's \$1.1 billion request.

At stake are several big R&D efforts at Transportation, including high-speed rail, air-traffic control, bomb detection systems, and "intelligent transportation systems"—technologies for improving highway traffic flow. "It's fair to say most of these projects will not be picked up by the private sector," says Noah Rifkin, DOT's director of technology deployment, because the research doesn't promise the quick payoff that industry often seeks.

Outside experts, meanwhile, give DOT research mixed reviews—which suggests that some projects might be worth saving and others scrapping. One booster is Dennis McLaughlin, chair of aerospace engineering at Pennsylvania State University, who lauds DOT's air traffic research and says that cutting it would be a "gigantic" loss because of the need for more modern facilities to handle the ever-growing amount of air traffic.

Others are more sanguine about the cuts. Kevin Dopart, a senior analyst at Congress's Office of Technology Assessment, predicts that industry will pick up where DOT leaves off on high quality projects such as satellite navigation systems, part of the intelligent highways initiative. Much of what remains, he says, has made slow progress so far—as is the case with bomb detection.

A DOT analyst says the agency's R&D budget should fare somewhat better in the Senate, which is scheduled to take up the spending bill next month.

## Lighting a Fire Under Ecologists

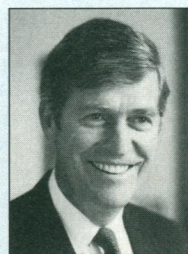
Members of Congress returning to their districts for August recess may find themselves getting an earful from an unlikely brand of constituent: ecologists.

Many an ecologist has complained bitterly on the Internet and on campus about Republican-led attacks on the National Biological Service and other federal ecology research programs. Now comes Timothy E. Wirth, undersecretary of State for global affairs and former Senator from Colorado, hoping to turn that acrimony into action. At the annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) last week, Wirth engaged in a bit of rabble rousing: "Insist on seeing" your congressman, Wirth said. "If he doesn't see you, you can make [that] an issue. Embarrass him!"

It's unclear how the 2500 ecologists at the meeting will respond to Wirth's exhortations. Scientists tend to

be aloof from the political process—and ecologists are the rule rather than the exception. "I can think of few groups who have been less involved in the past, and who need to be more involved in the future," Wirth told *Science*.

But there are signs that ecologists are becoming more savvy. At the meeting, the ESA, which doesn't lobby, passed a resolution urging Congress to continue bipartisan support for ecology. Now ESA officials are urging members to take the ball and run with it. If Wirth's talk "doesn't get us going," says past ESA president Judy Meyer, "nothing will."



**Tim Wirth**