

edited by JOCELYN KAISER

RITA COLWELL/UNIV. OF MARYLAND BIOTECH INSTITUTE

## NAS Backs Study of Health, Global Change

Health and climate researchers who fear global warming will spread human disease got some attention last week when the White House, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) held a conference on the topic. Now the NAS is ready to take the next step: It's seeking supporters for a formal study of the links between climate and disease.

Concerns are growing that global warming could have lethal effects by inducing heat waves, plankton blooms, and the spread of mosquitoes and other disease vectors (*Science*, 17 February, p. 957). Among those who weighed in on the issue last week was Vice



**Looming hazard?** Study may look at such issues as whether global warming will increase algal blooms, which can hold cholera bacteria.

President Al Gore, who in an hour-long address assailed congressional plans to slash funds for global change research.

Now the NAS wants to go beyond "arm-waving and hand-wringing" and take "the first logical step" toward understanding the risks, says William Sprigg,

director of the NAS Board on Atmospheric Sciences and Climate. The board's plan: an independent panel to look at suggested links between climate and health and devise a research strategy, in part by holding two international workshops.

The NAS has sent the proposal to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and other agencies in search of funds to start the study in 1996. Sprigg thinks the cost—\$1 million over 3 years—is justified "considering the focus of global talent that will result."

## RAC Faces Uncertain Future

The Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC), a group of 20 experts that offers advice to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on human gene therapy, will soon get some blunt advice from an advisory panel on how to streamline its operations. And there are signs that an influential senator is even thinking about doing away with the committee altogether.

The possibility of action on Capitol Hill surfaced when a planning memo drafted for Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), who chairs the Senate subcommittee that authorizes funding for NIH, was recently leaked to the press. Its suggestion to pull the plug on RAC is consistent with earlier comments from Kassebaum, who has urged NIH to reduce costs by trimming management functions. A Kassebaum staffer declined to comment on the internal memo, saying only that it was "a preliminary draft" that would not reach its final form until early next year.

That step would please the biotechnology companies, which have said that RAC duplicates efforts begun 5 years ago by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to review every federally funded human gene therapy protocol (*Science*, 25 August, p. 1054). There is one difference: RAC conducts its reviews in public, while FDA's are done behind closed doors.

In the meantime, a team appointed by NIH Director Harold Varmus is finishing up a scientists' review of how RAC might be improved. This committee—composed of biomedical researchers and chaired by Inder Verma, an oncogene researcher at the Salk Institute in San Diego—has been at work since February and is expected to deliver its report by October. Among the anticipated recommendations: Curtail RAC's review of gene therapy protocols and ask it to focus instead on policy and ethics.

## Stormy Forecast for Weather Budget

For managers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the timing must have seemed perfect. Hurricanes are roiling the Caribbean and threatening the U.S. East Coast just as the Senate considers annual funding for NOAA in general and the National Weather Service in particular.

But members of the Senate Appropriations Committee last week refused to bow to Mother

Nature, much less to the pleas of the Administration. Instead, they proposed chopping the service's budget from \$659 million to \$596 million—\$8 million less than the House and well below the White House request. The 9% cut should come from shedding staff, the committee stated.

The subcommittee that funds NOAA, chaired by Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX), reversed some House cuts, however. For example, it decided not to close the weather service's Pacific and

Alaska regional headquarters—a \$366,000 operation. And the panel strongly urges that \$3.6 million be used to improve ground turbulence and aviation forecasting—with \$200,000 earmarked for the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. No surprise: Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) is the number two Republican on the panel. The House and Senate must work out their differences before the massive bill goes to President Clinton, who has threatened to veto either version.

## Panel Sees Larger Role for States

A new report\* that urges closer scientific ties between the federal and state governments may be that rare commodity in Washington—something both the White House and Congress can embrace because it won't add to the federal deficit. The brief report, requested by the Administration last spring and released earlier this month, says state stewardship is one way to maintain the nation's return on its R&D investment in an era of shrinking federal budgets.

"Some concrete actions will come out of this," promises Tim Newell of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy about the work of a 20-member bipartisan committee co-chaired by former governors Dick Thornburgh of Pennsylvania, a Republican, and Richard Celeste of Ohio, a Democrat. Mary Good, Undersecretary for Technology of the

Department of Commerce, is already acting on one recommendation: She's leading an interagency panel aimed at giving states a bigger role in shaping, and perhaps managing, federal research programs.

The task force also suggests a national program modeled on the manufacturing extension partnerships (MEP) within Commerce, which are co-funded by state and local governments to give companies a scientific shot in the arm. That program is practically the only technology effort by the Clinton Administration with a good chance of survival in Congress. Members like the local focus of the 42 current centers, says one congressional technology aide, and see the program as an industrial counterpart to the politically popular agricultural extension service. Thornburgh says the panel highlighted MEP because it works.

Before the panel dissolves, Thornburgh says, it hopes to carry its message to business and government leaders around the country.

\* Final report of the State-Federal Technology Partnership Task Force; call 216-734-0094.