

edited by JOCELYN KAISER



Gone from view? Among programs NBS expects to cut is satellite tracking of endangered Florida manatees.

Biological Survey: Down, Not Out

The good news from Congress for the National Biological Service (NBS) is that it's likely to survive in some form. The bad news, says NBS Director Ron Pulliam, is that a smaller budget will force deep cuts in such programs as studies of freshwater fisheries, bird populations, and rangelands, and all global change research.

The key decision occurred in a House and Senate conference last week, which crafted a final Department of Interior funding bill that renamed the NBS the Natural Resources Science Agency and placed it under the U.S. Geological Survey. The conferees gave NBS programs \$137 million, a 15% cut from 1995 but closer to the Senate's recommendation of \$146 million than to the House's of \$113 million. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said the NBS's demotion

is less important than the lost funding.

President Clinton's pledge to veto the bill raises the possibility of a fight that could rescue the agency or give it more money. Congress must either override the veto or come up with a new bill that responds to the White House's

primary concerns about provisions for oil drilling in Alaska and cuts in national park funds. Babbitt says basic research is a worry as well: "A lot is being trashed in the crusade against science."

Singapore Makes Internet a Private Affair

Net surfing may become an unaffordable luxury for researchers and academics in Singapore. That fear stems from a government decision this month to privatize the service that provides Internet access to the country's 550 research labs and academic institutions.

For now, the new manager of Technet, Pacific Internet Ltd., will charge institutions the same flat rate they have been paying to the previous operator, the National University of Singapore (NUS). And the government's National Science and Technol-

ogy Board has promised to continue its current subsidy for the next 3 years, although the money will go directly to institutions rather than to NUS.

The effect of privatization on prices is not clear, says Goh Teng Chiew, deputy director of the computer center at Nanyang Technological University. Competition for subscribers among three firms offering Internet access may hold down prices, he says. But if institutions are charged based on the number of users or the volume of traffic, the cost could skyrocket.

The explosive growth of graphics on the Internet is the reason behind the government's decision, according to Thio Hoe Tong, director of the computer center at the National University. While low-cost, low-capacity international lines were fine for text transmissions, they just aren't up to the demands of graphics and video, he says. The government decided a private company could better handle the challenge of holding down costs and improving service. Any cost-saving measures, says Thio, are most likely to be felt by those surfing the Net in areas not vital to their research. "We don't have money to throw away," Thio says.

A Crack in the Bell

The venerable institution called Bell Laboratories will be split apart as a result of AT&T Corporation's decision last week to break up into three distinct companies. About 1400 of 26,000 employees conduct research at the labs, which over nearly 7 decades have produced tens of thousands of patents, innumerable advances in telephone technology, and Nobel Prize-winning research.

Most researchers will remain part of Bell Labs under a hardware company, as yet nameless, which will focus on making communications equipment and computer chips. The rest, mainly software developers, will become part of AT&T Laboratories, owned by AT&T.

Nuke Labs Given New Lease on Life

The nation's three nuclear weapons labs are safe for now. President Bill Clinton signed a statement this week that says "the continued vitality of all three DOE [Department of Energy] nuclear weapons laboratories will be essential" for national security.

Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary told reporters that the announcement lays to rest speculation that one lab—Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California—faced extinction in the wake of the Cold War. Until now, O'Leary supported consolidating Livermore's weapons work at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, a recommendation made in February by an independent panel led by Motorola Chairman Robert Galvin. The savings from such a move, she now says, would be negligible. Keeping Livermore operating also helps ensure military support for a comprehensive test ban, observers say.

The presidential directive also ends an 18-month Administration review of the labs and centers run by DOE, the Department of Defense, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which account for nearly 20% of all federal research and development spending. The Cold War's end and tightening budgets have led many—including some Republicans in Congress—to question whether the system is too large and bloated. Clinton called for "aggressive management reforms," but promised his Administration would not allow "severe budget cuts or senseless closures."

The fate of the other two dozen DOE labs is less certain—particularly for the smaller facilities. O'Leary says that next spring she will propose privatizing at least two of those, while trimming \$1.6 billion from the lab system budget over the next 5 years. Given the president's endorsement, however, don't expect closures of major facilities anytime soon.

Ethics Panel Coming Together

Bioethicists, rejoice! Next week President Clinton is expected to end a 12-year stretch without any national body to deliberate on the social and moral issues raised by medical technology with an executive order creating the National Bioethics Advisory Committee (NBAC).

Six agencies have "stepped up to the bat" to provide funding for NBAC, says an official in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which is likely to kick in the largest share, about \$500,000. Another \$500,000 will be contributed jointly by the Departments of Defense and Energy, the Veterans Administration, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Science Foundation. The NBAC had a predecessor created in 1978, the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, but its charter expired in 1983.

A White House charter drafted last year outlines two prospective areas for the new panel—"issues in the management and use of genetic information, and protection of the rights and welfare of research subjects." NBAC would not replace existing advisory bodies managed by the National Institutes of Health, but would "call upon them" and "elevate" their work, according to the HHS official.