edited by JOCELYN KAISER

Fund to Boost Latin American Science

Agricultural scientists in Latin America and the Caribbean face a twofold funding problem: Their cash-strapped governments have cut agricultural research 15% since the early 1980s, even as scientists' ranks have grown 22%, creating a money crisis. In response, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is laying plans to rescue Latin American agricultural science budgets with a new regional fund for research.

The plan would pool $150 million donated by at least 15 beneficiary countries, along with $50 million from other countries and organizations, in an endowment that would distribute $10 million each year in peer-reviewed research awards to universities and national and international research centers. The work to be supported may include such areas as restoring nutrient-poor soil, using genetics to improve crop disease resistance, and managing fragile ecosystems.

IDB

Field work. New fund would support research such as efforts to enrich soil depleted by corn crops.

IDB Executive Vice President Nancy Birdsall, who presented the draft proposal earlier this month at a World Bank conference in Washington, D.C., says a key aspect of the fund is that "the beneficiaries are the contributors," guaranteeing good oversight of the technology projects. And Ruben Echeverria, senior economist of the IDB Environment Division, says the fund will have a "huge impact" by providing long-term funding and integrating research from multiple countries.

The IDB is seeking pledges of support from the 15 beneficiary countries in hopes of collecting $50 million by March. Echeverria says the bank could award the first grants early in 1997.

Congress Targets Superfund Research

Congress is poised to take a big slice out of the federal government's only program to carry out basic research on cleaning up hazardous waste.

At risk is the Superfund Basic Research Program (SBRP), set up in 1986 to support peer-reviewed university studies from contaminant transport to the toxicology of benzene. The money—$36 million this year—comes from industry and is passed through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, which this year funded 139 projects at 63 institutions. The EPA itself will spend another $60 million on Superfund research, but only on applied work. SBRP's director, William Suk, says his program is unique in its interdisciplinary approach and studies such as developing mechanistically based risk assessments.

But the program faces an uncertain future. A House-Senate conference in the next few days will try to agree on the program's 1996 budget, which the House wants to reduce by 12% and the Senate would slash by 56%, to $16 million. The Senate version "would be devastating," Suk says.

Also troubling is an authorization bill being drafted by a House Commerce subcommittee chaired by Representative Michael Oxley (R–OH). The draft bill doesn't mention funds for SBRP, which "[we] fear is an attempt to zero it out," says James Swenberg, who directs the SBRP program at the University of North Carolina. An Oxley staffer says the committee isn't trying to kill SBRP, but thinks industry should pay "just for cleanup," and that SBRP should be funded "through the normal appropriations" for EPA or the National Institutes of Health—unlikely given the current budget climate, Suk says. It's uncertain whether the House authorization would take effect until 1997, but "regardless of whose version you talk about," Suk says, scientists are worried.

U.S. Forensic Team Aids Bosnian Effort

Medical authorities in Bosnia are beginning the grisly task of identifying bodies in mass graves, says Moses Schanfield, director of the Analytical Genetic Testing Center in Denver and a member of a U.S. forensic team just back from the region. Schanfield estimates that less than one third of the missing civilians in villages he visited have been accounted for, based on the number of bodies recovered from two sites. In all, Schanfield says, 28 mass graves have been found, but he adds, "My guess is that there may be a hundred."

Schanfield took a week's vacation to join five U.S. scientists on a trip funded by AmeriCares, a charity based in New Canaan, Connecticut. The team included a pediatric osteologist, David Rowe of the University of Connecticut, and three forensic specialists who consulted for the prosecution on the O. J. Simpson case—Michael Baden, director of the New York State Police forensic sciences unit; Henry Lee, director of the Connecticut State Police forensics unit; and Barbara Wolf, director of anatomic pathology at the Albany Medical Center in New York.

U.S. researchers collaborated in setting up a DNA lab to help identify war victims at the Split Hospital in Croatia a year ago. The lab is running smoothly, Schanfield says, but the four-person pathology unit is overwhelmed by routine duties, war casualties, and the dead. Few exhumed bodies require DNA identification, but those that do are time-consuming. It is "emotionally draining" work, he adds, recalling how one young volunteer by chance dug up the remains of his own brother. The U.S. team has no plans at present to return to Croatia.

Advisers Champion Applied Research

With budget negotiations between the White House and Congress in deadlock, President Clinton's Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology (PCAST) has taken a stand—albeit a cautious one—on cuts proposed by the Republican Congress. The panel chaired by John Young urged Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R–KS) and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) in a recent letter to continue funding "both basic and applied research and development."

It is applied research that is under fire from Republicans, who argue that efforts such as the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program amount to corporate welfare. PCAST, however, maintains that without federal support for such research through cooperative agreements between government and companies, "our industries will be at a significant competitive disadvantage, and our nation's strength will be diminished." The council reinforces that point in a set of principles accompanying Young's letter. The principles also strongly support fundamental research and science and engineering education, areas largely untouched by congressional budget-cutting. But the letter doesn't take issue with specific program cuts proposed for 1996.

PCAST members also have a message for Clinton, who was slated to give his first major science and technology speech 18 October at the White House. They urged him in a recent letter to take their principles into account in formulating his 1997 budget request, which the Office of Management and Budget is now putting together.