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NIF Gets Green Light

Advocates of magnetic fusion had long faces last week as they saw their budget cut by a third (see p. 728), but those who back an alternative—inertial fusion—had reason to smile. A House and Senate conference committee approved the full $61 million that the Department of Energy (DOE) asked for to start designing the National Ignition Facility (NIF), a $1 billion arrangement of 192 powerful lasers that would help weapons researchers test the U.S. nuclear stockpile without conducting underground explosions. The facility, which likely would be built at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, would also allow researchers to study ways to achieve fusion by compressing a pellet of hydrogen to helium.

The House had allocated only half of DOE's request for NIF. The Senate, however, acting after President Clinton pledged to seek a comprehensive test ban this summer, backed full funding. A bipartisan group of representatives from the San Francisco area successfully pushed in conference for the Senate figure. "Yesterday's vote is really the sound of the starter's gun being fired," says Mike Campbell, head of the lasers directorate at Livermore. But don't expect a sprint: Construction of NIF, set to begin in 1997, will take several years to complete.

USDA-ARS

Menace to biodiversity? Delegates will ponder the risks of transgenic products such as these spoilage-resistant tomatoes.

Countries to Debate Global Biosafety Rules

Mandatory controls on the use of genetically modified organisms will be on the table next week in Jakarta as delegates from 120 countries discuss how to implement an agreement reached at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The proposal, which rejects a stance taken last spring by a 15-member panel of biosafety experts, favors a more restrictive policy being promoted by developing countries that now lack biosafety standards. And U.S. biotech firms are worried that the parties will adopt rules that "aren't scientifically based," says Richard Godown, senior vice president of BIO, a lobbying group in Washington, D.C.

The meeting aims to put teeth into the Convention on Biological Diversity, signed at the Earth Summit, which calls in part for examining the potential threat to biodiversity from the spread of a crop bioengineered to resist herbicides, or the mating of a transgenic fish with wild fish. The United States—which hasn't ratified the treaty but participates as a nonvoting observer—and some other Western nations have argued for voluntary biosafety guidelines drawn up by the UN and other groups.

That's in line with the stance of an expert panel—mainly government officials—appointed by the convention, which suggested transgenics pose no greater threat to biodiversity than do traditionally bred organisms. But a larger panel of delegates presented with some scientific studies threw out that view in July and has recommended that the convention consider a binding protocol.

The U.S. delegation hasn't settled on a position, but observers say it is leaning toward support of a protocol governing the movement of transgenics across borders. "They have realized if they remain obstinate opponents, they may lose some ability to influence the content," says ecologist Rebecca Goldburg of the Environmental Defense Fund. Whatever is decided in Jakarta, the next step will be for a working group to hammer out the details.

Academy Plans Makeover for *PNAS*

The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which has highlighted the plight of underemployed Ph.D.s, is about to add some of its own brainy staffers to the ranks of the jobless. The academy's chief scientific publication, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (*PNAS*), is planning a major business shake-up and may dismiss 20 staffers.

According to a *PNAS* employee, higher-ups took editors and production staffers aside last week to inform them that they should begin looking for new jobs. The staffer, insisting on anonymity, said people in the office were stunned: "It's like when the train hit the school bus; no one knows what to say." Officially, the NAS isn't commenting. Information officer Susan Turner-Lowe does say, however, that "we are looking at ways of doing business better—of outsourcing." The academy wants to move rapidly into the electronic age and has decided to sign a contract with a private firm to publish *PNAS*: "It's the trend in scientific journal publishing," she says, adding that the details will be released soon.

Although several members of the *PNAS* editorial board told *Science* they had not been briefed on the overhaul, the new editor of *PNAS*, Nicholas Cozzarelli of the University of California, Berkeley, said the journal's renovation has been cleared "appropriately" by the NAS hierarchy. The chair of the NAS publications committee, John Hopfield of Caltech, said Cozzarelli was given a mandate by the NAS executive council to move ahead with "broad authority" to create a competitive money-making journal, one that would include advertising and possibly maintain a presence on the Internet's World Wide Web.

Cozzarelli declined to discuss his plans; he intends to present them in letters to NAS members and in a future issue of *PNAS*.

NIH Frets Over Budget Crisis

The legislative logjam that's delayed some funding bills could put a dent in what was supposed to be a good year for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). While many researchers may be hoping NIH will get a House-passed 5.7% increase, the Senate has yet to act. Faced with that uncertainty, NIH staffers are preparing a letter to 30,000 extramural scientists warning them to put the brakes on their spending plans until the agency's 1996 budget is final.

What's making NIH nervous is the status of a 5% cut imposed last summer as a temporary measure to slow federal spending until Congress and the president finished work on appropriations bills. Many observers assumed that Congress would give back the money "lost" during the hiatus when an agency's final appropriation was approved.

But that may not happen for some time, if ever. House and Senate aides now say it's almost certain the continuing resolution, set to expire on 13 November, will be extended into December, or even until next year. In addition, no one knows whether Congress will reinstate the income lost by agencies like NIH. The potential loss of revenue could hit extramural scientists as early as December, when NIH plans to start sending out its first batch of 1996 grant awards. Agency officials have drafted a letter advising grantees to delay big purchases and major hiring decisions.

However, NIH's situation is unusual. Most agencies are bracing for sizable cuts in their budgets. As a result, they are in no hurry to see Congress replace the milder temporary plan with a more drastic permanent budget. "We're in limbo," says an aide to Representative John Porter (R–IL), an NIH advocate, with no resolution in sight.