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Farm Bill Threatens Small Wetlands

Ecologists, who have been fearful that Congress will pass a revised Clean Water Act weakening protection of wetlands, now have more reason to worry: A Senate committee is about to consider legislation allowing farmers to drain small wetlands that are key habitat for wildlife across the prairie states.

The measure would roll back a part of the 1985 Farm Bill that bars subsidies for farmers who convert wetlands for crops. A Senate agriculture subcommittee will consider later this month a draft bill lifting the ban for wetlands dry enough to farm 6 of 10 years, and for those an acre or less in size. A House version, to go to the full agriculture committee in December, would also exempt wetlands under an acre.

Critics say the changes would apply to at least 4 million hect-

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Temporary digs. These ponds in Montana and other seasonal wetlands where waterfowl breed could be drained under farm bill provisions.

ares nationwide and could devastate the "prairie potholes" in states such as the Dakotas, Iowa, and Montana. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study released last week found the Senate bill could affect up to 970,000 hectares (44%) of these ponds, reducing duck migration by 48%. "A whole variety of plants and animals, even shorebirds" depend on the potholes, says Ned

Euliss, chief of ecosystems studies at the Northern Prairie Science Center near Jamestown, North Dakota. "It would also impact water quality" because the potholes act as filters, says wetlands ecologist Arnold Van Der Valk of Iowa State University.

A Senate staffer says the Senate bill "is not set in stone," although "we think it is fair to give farmers some relief."

Democrats Defend Technology

The White House and its congressional allies went to bat last week for some types of federal R&D, denouncing Republican plans to cut technology programs as part of a balanced budget. But their advocacy may disappoint academic researchers hoping for good news in 1996 and beyond, as top White House advisers warned that research agencies will be lucky to hold their own in future budget battles.

The occasion was a Capitol press briefing featuring the president's science adviser, Jack Gibbons, his economic adviser, Laura D'Andrea Tyson, and six Democratic senators. Their ire was directed at three pillars of the Republican budget strategy, none of them yet law—the House budget resolution that would trim federal R&D spending by 30% over 7 years, the House version of a budget reconciliation bill that would eliminate the Commerce Department, and a series of 1996 spending bills that would cut agency R&D budgets.

But while Tyson repeated her boss's assertion that "we do not have to cut R&D to balance the federal budget," she also said "we have to cut government spending, absolutely and in inflated dollars." The Administration "is trying to hold steady the share of the federal budget that goes for R&D," she said, but Gibbons added that "it's not going to be easy."

The briefing is part of a campaign by congressional Democrats to raise the visibility of research (*Science*, 29 September, p. 1810). A congressional delegation discussed the issue on 27 October with Chief of Staff Leon Panetta and other White House aides, and an Administration white paper on the value of technology was distributed at last week's briefing. Last week, 16 House members held the first meeting of an R&D task force aimed at making research an issue in the 1996 elections.

Geological Survey Layoffs Protested

About 80 federal employees who lost their jobs 14 October in a massive layoff at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) are now challenging the cuts, with some claiming discrimination and a

scheme to purge whistleblowers.

The USGS announced in August that budget pressures had forced it to cut 525 positions from its Geologic Division. On 9 November, 37 people fired from the Menlo Park, California, branch filed appeals with the U.S. Merit

Systems Protection Board. Another 50 or so from various branches have appealed separately, says USGS's William Cannon, who coordinated the cuts.

Mary Dryovage, lawyer for the Menlo Park group, charges that managers violated standard merit-based procedures: She claims that they wrote new job descriptions that protected certain employees and allowed others to be targeted. Dryovage says 16 of the 37 believe they were fired because they have spoken publicly about internal reports, revealed fraud, or otherwise acted as whistleblowers. "What happened was a purge," says Howard Wilshire, who wrote a critique with other USGS geologists in 1993 of a proposed Ward Valley, California, nuclear waste dump that put the project in limbo. Others in the group claim sex or age discrimination.

Cannon, however, says "there was absolutely nothing illegal or irregular" about the job cuts. The merit board has 120 days to respond and could decide some layoffs should be reversed.

Relativity Meets the Pork Factor

Albert Einstein's relativity theory applied to Washington politics might go something like this: A program's merit in the eyes of a lawmaker is relative to its impact on his or her constituents. That, at least, appears to be the case with two big-ticket items battling for priority in the Senate's version of the 1996 authorization bill for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The bill fails to fund Gravity Probe-B (GPB), a \$1 billion Stanford University project designed to test Einstein's theory. But it gives the Mission to Planet Earth (MTPE) program the full \$1.36 billion that NASA requested. Senator Larry Pressler (R-SD), who chairs the Senate committee that oversees NASA, says "the satellite data from [MTPE] will deliver direct benefits to the taxpayer in contrast to the speculative spin-offs promised by other space activities"—a reference to GPB. And he means direct benefits. The senator goes on to note that he takes "great pride" in the selection of the EROS Data Center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as one of MTPE's regional data centers.

The House has authorized just \$1 billion for MTPE and has given GPB the full \$50 million requested by NASA. A compromise will wait until House and Senate appropriators agree on NASA's funding level. Those figures—almost certain to include GPB funding—will have a big impact on the authorization plan. Odds are, say congressional aides, that when the horse-trading with Pressler is over, GPB will survive.