

GLOBAL CHANGE

Making Nice With the Nobelists

Sitting side-by-side last week in a congressional hearing room, the new Nobel laureate and the flame-throwing congressman made an odd couple. As a co-discoverer of the chemical processes that destroy stratospheric ozone, atmospheric chemist F. Sherwood Rowland has spent decades doing global change research, the results of which Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) has repeatedly blasted as "liberal claptrap." But Rohrabacher, who has also accused the Clinton Administration of playing politics with climate data, was uncharacteristically restrained in chatting with his fellow Californian during a press briefing following a private breakfast for five of the seven new U.S. laureates hosted by the leaders of the House Science Committee. "I'm keeping an open mind on all these issues," he said.

A possible explanation for Rohrabacher's newly avowed open-mindedness could be a recent meeting he had with Science Committee Chair Robert Walker (R-PA). Congressional sources say that Walker asked Rohrabacher, who chairs the committee's energy and environment panel, to soften his rhetoric, which Walker feared was embarrassing the committee and the party. Rohrabacher denies such a meeting took place.

The gathering for the Nobelists provided Walker, Rohrabacher, and Representative Steve Schiff (R-NM), chair of the basic research panel, a chance to mend fences with a scientific community nervous about Republican budget cuts and attacks on environmental research. Past Congresses "tended to politicize science," Walker said in an apparent dig at the former Democratic majority. "We should allow [scientists] to pick their highest priorities" for scarce funding, he added.

For their part, the Nobelists expressed relief that the lawmakers appear to be research-friendly. "The meeting this morning opened my mind to the fact that Chairman Walker and his subcommittee chairs are sincerely interested," said Edward Lewis, a biologist at the California Institute of Technology who helped unravel the genetics of fruit fly development. "I am surprised and grateful for their interest in basic research, though I am very concerned about the long-term [budget] prospects," added Eric Wieschaus, a Princeton University biologist whose work followed

Lewis's by nearly a generation. "We have [Walker's] personal commitment, but the scary thing is that we have a very, very uncertain situation."

Rowland, whose discipline Rohrabacher has attacked, had mild words for the actions



Warming trend? Rep. Rohrabacher and ozone researcher Rowland break bread.

of the new majority party in Congress. "No one knows what the budget will look like in 7 years," he said. "And for the next year, most aspects of basic research have done quite well." Rowland added that the current fiscal climate "makes it hard for scientists to argue they are a totally special group that deserves funding."

Rowland was equally careful in respond-

ing to Rohrabacher's lone sour note at the briefing—what he called the "incredible duplication" in the government's \$1.8 billion global change research program. Rowland said that duplication exists in most research and can be a positive factor. But he declined to criticize Rohrabacher, telling *Science* after the meeting that he wanted to avoid "an ideological shouting match which could harden up positions."

Such restraint may be harder for Rohrabacher, however. Just 24 hours after the breakfast, he returned to his harsh language when he chaired a hearing on global climate modeling. Rohrabacher accused Vice President Al Gore of firing Will Happer, former head of energy research at the Department of Energy, for disagreeing with the Administration's positions about ozone depletion, and complained that "there never really was a dialogue" about global warming research while the Democrats controlled Congress. The hearing suggests that Rohrabacher, despite cooling his heels while dining with the Nobelists, intends to keep the heat turned up on global change researchers.

—Andrew Lawler

ENERGY POLICY

DOE Tritium Plan Burns Up Republicans

A group of House Republicans is pushing a proposal to produce more tritium for U.S. nuclear weapons that would leave science out in the cold. They want Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary to scrap a proposal she announced last month to study the feasibility of building an advanced proton accelerator, as well as the possibility of converting a commercial nuclear reactor, to replenish the nation's supply of the vital radioisotope (*Science*, 13 October, p. 227).

O'Leary's strategy was welcomed by researchers at Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the bulk of the accelerator design work would be conducted. But last week a group of Republican lawmakers, backed by nuclear-power interests, said that the tritium instead should come from a new, "triple-play" reactor to be built at the Savannah River nuclear complex in South Carolina that could also generate electricity and burn up plutonium from other reactors.

"It's not cost driving this train; it's bias," argues Representative Lindsey Graham (R-SC), a freshman lawmaker who chaired a Republican task force appointed by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) that blasted the Department of Energy's (DOE's) tritium plan as "an excuse to develop a more powerful accelerator for scientific research." Testifying last week before the House Commerce Committee's energy and power subcommittee, Graham told his colleagues that "we should not spend \$300 million to look at

an experimental technology. We need to take a technology that we know works."

Democrats and DOE officials dispute this logic. Representative Edward Markey (D-MA) derided the triple-play reactor as "one piece of radioactive pork we can ill afford." He noted that a proposal to add \$50 million to the tritium study, aimed at a Swiss-led consortium that hoped to build such a reactor, was defeated by the House earlier this year. Deputy Energy Secretary Charles Curtis also noted that a reactor, unlike an accelerator, must undergo a protracted process to obtain a license.

However, it is not just Democrats who disagree with Graham's contentions. Representative John Ensign (R-NV), a task force member, wrote a dissenting view that says the report's conclusion ignores environmental, public safety, and nonproliferation issues. "I'm afraid politics is driving this, not good science," he told the committee.

The Republican sniping is unlikely to deter DOE, which has \$5 million to study the light-water reactor option and \$45 million to examine the accelerator option in the coming year. However, it's going to be very difficult to find the \$10 billion or more needed to build either an accelerator or a triple-play reactor. Last week Curtis found a way to accommodate all sides by promising that DOE will keep its options open for at least another year.

—Andrew Lawler