

Environment Institute Plan in the Works

The notion of creating a new federal institution for environmental science may seem quixotic, given Washington's chilly budget climate. But that isn't stopping Representative Jim Saxton (R-NJ) from drafting a bill for such a project that he expects to introduce in the House within a few days. Gary Gallant, Saxton's press secretary, says the congressman is still mulling over the details and cost of a National Institute for the Environment (NIE), whose price tag a 1994 draft bill set at \$100 million. But Saxton says that no new money would be needed, because the funds could be found for NIE by combining environmental research programs from various agencies.

NIE's backers also claim to have friends in high places: They note that House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) co-sponsored the NIE bill last time around. As before, "we have his support," says Carole Zimmerman of the lobbying group Committee for the NIE. And Gallant says putting environmental science under one roof would meet Republican desires to consolidate government and "remove politics" from the regulatory process. "We think this concept fits in very nicely with what this Congress is trying to do," Gallant says. He predicts the House Resources Committee could approve the bill and send it to the full House by next spring.



Fish safety. ABRAC just released a guide on studying transgenic fish, such as the two larger carp above.

USDA Kills Biotech Office, Advisory Panel

Blaming congressional cutbacks, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will soon abolish the department's 9-year-old Office of Agricultural Biotechnology (OAB) and the panel of outside advisers that the OAB supported. OAB Director Alvin Young said last week that the 15 scientists on the Agricultural Biotechnology Research Advisory Committee (ABRAC) will hold their last meeting on 19 January. Shortly thereafter, the OAB, which coordinates biotech at USDA, will close its doors.

The reason, says USDA Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics Karl Stauber, is that the 1996 USDA spending bill cuts \$300,000 of OAB's

\$500,000 of funding. The bill's report also pushes USDA to shed advisory panels. Stauber says ABRAC "is the only committee we were basically told to terminate"—a message that came "through back channels."

ABRAC's demise is drawing a mixed reaction. "I'm thoroughly upset about it," says Georgetown University nutritionist Robin Woo, an ABRAC member. Rachel Levinson of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy notes that the panel has made "some very important contributions," such as writing guidelines for safe research on transgenic plants and fish. At the same time, says ABRAC member Pam Marrone, an entomologist with Agra Quest Inc. in Davis, California, USDA never gave ABRAC's decisions regulatory weight, making it "a committee looking for a mission." And some say ABRAC and OAB had outlived their usefulness. Don Emlay, head of regulatory affairs for Calgene Inc. in Davis, says the groups became "self-serving," perpetuating concerns about biotech even after many scientists believed they had been resolved.

The fate of the OAB—whose six staffers represent USDA on a multiagency biotech committee, organize conferences, and put out a monthly newsletter with 500,000 subscribers—is still unknown. Stauber has asked USDA managers to name functions that might be shifted to other parts of USDA or terminated.

Bills Aim to Prevent Genetic Discrimination

As scientists race to identify new genes linked to disease, Congress is trying to offset a social impact these finds will likely have—namely, making it easier for insurance companies to classify individuals according to inherited risk. Already, Congress is considering several bills designed to bar discrimination against people who may carry a disease gene.

One bill, introduced in the Labor and Human Resources Committee by Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR) last month, would flatly prohibit a health insurer from using genetic information to "reject, deny, limit, cancel, refuse to renew, increase the rates of, or otherwise affect health insurance." It would also require written authorization for the release of genetic test results by anyone and prohibit employers from discriminating against an individual based on genetic information. A companion bill has been introduced in the House, as well a bill sponsored by Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) that applies only to insurers.

Kathy Hudson, policy coordinator for the National Center for Human Genome Research, calls the bills "an overwhelming congressional response" to recommendations she and other members of a National Institutes of Health-Department of Energy working group on social implications of genetic research published in *Science* this fall (20 October, p. 391). The group called for federal policies much like those in Hatfield's bill.

A Hatfield staffer says the senator doesn't expect Congress to adopt his bill as free-standing legislation. Rather, he hopes committees will incorporate the bill's provisions in two measures to reform health insurance and ensure the confidentiality of medical records. Hudson says while it's too early to predict what will emerge from the proposals, "the number of bills increases the probability that some action will be taken."

NSB Approves Violence Consortium

After a 4-month hesitation, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is ready to fund what may be the largest single social science project it has ever supported—a \$12 million Consortium for Violence Research. The National Science Board (NSB), NSF's governing body, last week gave the project its official go-ahead, which was expected to be relayed shortly to the coordinator, Carnegie Mellon University.

Plans for such a consortium were among projects attacked last spring by congressional Republicans, notably Rep. Robert S. Walker (R-PA), chair of the House Science Committee, who asserted that much social science research is dedicated to pressing a liberal political agenda. But NSF officials say the delay in funding the consortium was due to the complex-

ties of the deal, not fear of Republican wrath.

The consortium is a unique undertaking in many ways, says its director, Carnegie Mellon criminologist Alfred Blumstein. It is composed of individual, not institutional, members, with 39 researchers at 24 institutions. It will receive about \$12.1 million from NSF over the next 5 years. Unlike a controversial conference on genetic influences on criminal behavior (*Science*, 29 September, p. 1808), the consortium will be concerned primarily with "situational" and societal factors in violent behavior, Blumstein says. The group includes only two biologically oriented researchers: psychologist Terrie Moffitt of the University of Wisconsin, and psychologist Adrian Raine of the University of Southern California.