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Conference to Boost Eco-Biotech

While U.S. know-how has long dominated the medical biotechnology arena, other countries are leading the way in applying biotech to clean and protect the environment. But the White House and industry hope that a meeting this spring will help bring U.S. companies up to speed with the competition.

Environmental Biotech '96, to be held 12 to 13 June in Philadelphia, will "focus on the commercial opportunities and the [proper] role of government," says Jay Grimes of the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Research. Grimes heads a bio-remediation working group within the National Science and Technology Council, which is co-sponsoring the meeting along with the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO).

DAVID M. DOODY/UNIPHOTO

Just for starters. Meeting will promote biotech for cleanup and more.

Grimes says U.S. companies need to expand beyond using organisms for remediation—cleaning up oil spills and dumps—to such uses as detecting noxious chemicals and treating polluted air. But the industry is hampered by some of the same problems that plague biotech drug firms, says BIO's President, Carl Feldbaum, including onerous regulations and a capital shortage. Conferees will seek to "identify market bottlenecks," Grimes says, and perhaps propose how agencies can help.

BIO itself has just stepped up its eco-activities: Last fall, the group formed a new environmental section that's lobbying for legislation that encourages the use of biotech cleanup methods.

Twin Scopes Funded

After a 2-year search, the Carnegie Institution has found two new partners to help finish a project Carnegie is managing—construction of a pair of 6.5-meter-aperture telescopes in Las Campanas, Chile. The telescopes will make up the largest private astronomy facility in the Southern Hemisphere.

The two newcomers to the $68 million twin observatory system, known as the Magellan Project, will be the University of Michigan and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The original sponsors were Carnegie and the University of Arizona, which were joined by Harvard University last fall. Harvard's entry gave the group enough funds to build the first instrument—the Magellan I optical and infrared telescope, to be completed in 1998 (*Science*, 15 December 1995, p. 1765). By signing up two more partners this month, says Carnegie President Maxine Singer, the project has now secured construction of Magellan II 60 meters from the first telescope. Each partner will get viewing time equivalent to its final contribution. Michigan will get 10% of the hours, MIT 8% to 10%, Harvard 14% to 20%, and Carnegie 50% (Chilean astronomers will get 10% free of charge).

The telescopes will be used to study topics such as galaxy formation and may be linked for a high-resolution technique called interferometry. While Carnegie Observatories Director Gus Oemler says such plans aren't in the current budget, he notes that a tunnel for combining light from the two telescopes has already been built.

Salk Jilted Again

History is repeating itself at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, where a 15-month search for a new leader seemed complete—until the candidate backed out at the eleventh hour. The choice to run the prestigious La Jolla, California, institution was James Darnell Jr., a Rockefeller University molecular biologist. But sources say Darnell declined last week, sending the search committee back to the drawing board. Darnell was also a top candidate for the Salk helm the last time it was leaderless, a stretch that ran from 1989 to 1993, but turned down an offer then, too. The difficulty in finding a scientist interested in running the institution has now resurrected talk of searching for a nonscientist instead.

Goldin Shakes Up Space Science

Scientists who look to the space program for support have received a scolding by the director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), who also warned that "a change in the sea state" is coming in the way the agency funds science.

Speaking in Baltimore on 9 February at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting, NASA chief Daniel Goldin said he was disappointed that space scientists had not been more successful in the past year at conveying the value of their work to laypeople. "The American public is picking up the bill for the science that we do," Goldin said. "We need to do a better job" of spreading the NASA gospel.

Goldin also said that the reorganization under way at NASA will do away with many research categories and consolidate disciplines into a single scientific group. "I am shutting down all the scientific hot-dog stands at NASA," he said, meaning that scientific missions will not be organized by disciplinary speciality. Instead, all proposals will compete for a single pot of money.

As NASA's budget shrinks, Goldin added, mentioning such cost-cutting efforts as consolidating offices, "there will be hundreds, not thousands of people" at agency headquarters.

NSF's Up and Down Budget

When is an increase not really an increase? When it's next year's budget request for the National Science Foundation (NSF). *Science* has learned that the president plans to ask for less money for NSF in the 1997 fiscal year than the $3.36 billion he sought in 1996. On the other hand, the new figure—still under discussion—is likely to be higher than the $3.23 billion NSF received in 1995 and more than it's getting under a continuing budget resolution that expires on 15 March, a prorated budget of $3.18 billion.

The simplified 1997 budget request released by the White House on 5 February mentions only "adding funds for basic research and education at NSF." Jack Gibbons, the president's science adviser, repeated that phrase last week at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. But as one NSF official wondered after the talk: What's the baseline?

Gibbons explained after the speech that the president's arithmetic starts with 1995, not 1996. The Administration also seems to be ahead of NSF in knowing how the increase will be divided: Gibbons said education and training would grow as well as basic research, but NSF Director Neal Lane says his staff is still discussing the allocation among programs.

Gibbons may have been vague on some budget issues, but he was angry about one number from this year's budget—the 5.7% increase that Congress bestowed on the National Institutes of Health last month, topping the Administration's requested 4.2% increase. "It's tempting for agencies to arrange such sweetheart deals," Gibbons said, "but in the long run the only winners will be nonscience, nontechnology programs. We can't afford such cutthroat squabbling."