

## Scientists Not Worth Wooing?

Republicans like Representative Robert Walker (PA), who chairs the House Science Committee, dismiss Vice President Al Gore's recent blitz of science and technology speeches as political posturing with an eye on the November elections. But last week in a brief roundtable with reporters, Gore sought to lay to rest the charge that the White House is wooing the science community's votes—and showed a certain cynicism about the importance of the science vote.

"Yeah, those scientists are a major political bloc," Gore said sarcastically. "In places like Iowa and New Hampshire, you can just see them out there turning the tide." Instead, Gore insists that his recent defense of the Administration's R&D plan is for a purer purpose: "We think it is the right thing for the country." In a rush to meet with the president, Gore then cut the roundtable short.

## Agencies Debate Safe Mercury Levels in Fish

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other agencies are sparring over a pending report to Congress that suggests stronger controls on mercury exposure may be needed, and the debate may only escalate in view

of new studies that reach different conclusions about the hazards of mercury in fish.

The report, mandated by the 1990 Clean Air Act, describes U.S. mercury emissions and sums up their effects on health. When EPA released a draft last fall, the Food and Drug Administration became concerned that EPA's health risk estimate could cause FDA to adopt a more stringent



**Feeling fine.** Seychelles study has found no mercury effects in kids whose mothers eat lots of fish.

"action level" for safe levels of methylmercury, a potent neurotoxin, in fish. FDA inspects seafood based on this level, now one part per million, and many states rely on it to restrict fishing.

The risk estimate in EPA's draft implied that FDA's action level should be three to five times lower, says FDA toxicologist Michael Bolger. FDA charged that the EPA's analysis relied too heavily on extrapolations from

fetal damage in an Iraqi population poisoned with mercury in the 1970s. Representative John Dingell (D-MI) also objected, saying any mercury regulations should be based on sound science. In comments filed last week with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which is reviewing the report, FDA and the National Marine Fisheries Service call on EPA to re-examine its models of mercury uptake in fish and to consider the first major studies to look directly at low-dose mercury effects in a fish-eating population.

The new results, however, are equivocal. One study, published by University of Rochester researchers this month in the journal *NeuroToxicology*, has found no developmental damage in 1500 Seychelles Islands children up to 5.5 years old whose mothers ate fish daily. But a similar study soon to be published by a Danish group points in the opposite direction. It finds significant effects in 1000 7-year-olds in the Faroe Islands, and the results could imply that EPA's risk estimate should be even lower than that in last fall's draft.

Meanwhile, the EPA is awaiting OMB's response and "trying to put it [all] in perspective," says Kate Mahaffey, a report co-author. Mahaffey says the report may not be out until next summer.

## Panel to Review British Universities

The British government, facing a deepening crisis in the quality of higher education, this week launched a review of the country's universities that may lead to major institutional changes by the end of the decade. The scale of the agenda—covering the system's purpose, size, and funding—"exceeds anything facing higher education since the early 1960s," says Gillian Shephard, education and employment secretary.

Pressures on universities have mounted since the government expanded student enrollment 3 years ago while continuing funding cuts that have reduced spending per student by one-third since 1989 (*Science*, 2 February, p. 688). Deteriorating staff salaries and conditions have paid for the expansion, and quality is suffering, says a spokesperson for the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals. Universities are threatening to impose a \$450 surcharge on new students next year unless the cuts are reversed.

In response, Shephard has set up an independent review, to be chaired by Ron Dearing, chair of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority. The review is expected to result in recommendations to Parliament on coping with the funding crisis. The panel will also look "at the balance between teaching and research," Shephard says. Funding cuts have hit science departments directly, with money for new equipment and buildings slashed by 30% in November. Last week, Shephard also invited vice chancellors to join a separate investigation of the effects of the November budget and government efforts to increase private investment in universities.

One option the Dearing panel may recommend is scrapping Britain's principle of providing free tuition to most students. But the electorate isn't likely to welcome such a measure, and the panel will not release its report until mid-1997, after the election has been held.

## Reaching Out to Eastern European Telecom Scientists

The Iron Curtain may be history, but try sending a message to Central and Eastern Europe (C&EE). Much of the region relies on antiquated telecommunications equipment that complicates long-distance calling and limits Internet access to e-mail. To address this problem, the European Union (EU) is stepping up efforts to involve C&EE researchers in an ambitious new telecommunications research program.

The 5-year program, called Advanced Communications Technologies and Services (ACTS), supports groups of partners studying technologies such as satellite systems, "virtual" Internet work environments, and interactive television. Last year, the EU committed 432 million ECU (\$540 million) for a first round of peer-reviewed ACTS projects. But of 119 projects selected for funding so far, only one has a C&EE partner—Russia's Rubin Research Institute. C&EE scientists "may just not have had the means to go and

look for partners or invest in traveling," says former ACTS Director Roland Hüber, who retired this month. Another problem, claims Youri Arzoumanian, a dean at the State University of Telecommunications in St. Petersburg, Russia, is that Western European telecom scientists "don't believe they can find something interesting in Russia."

ACTS officials held a workshop in Budapest last November in hopes of encouraging more C&EE proposals before the 1 March deadline for a second round of awards, and this time about 6 million ECU has been set aside for C&EE projects. That's good news for researchers like St. Petersburg State Technical University radiophysicist Yuri Yavon, who has submitted a proposal on mobile microwave communications. Says Yavon: "No funding or support from the Russian government [for such research] is available now, and I have no [other] hopes."