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NOAA

**Polar priority.** Panel says U.S. should continue to staff South Pole Station year-round.

## U.S. Antarctic Bases Cool, Review Says

Two recent decisions by the Clinton Administration appear to have put U.S. Antarctic policy on firmer political and fiscal footing. A top-level White House review due out later this month is expected to back a year-round U.S. presence at the South Pole and continued support for the three stations on the continent. And the National Science Foundation (NSF), which oversees the U.S. Antarctic program, has won presidential approval to request about $20 million in its 1997 budget to correct environmental and safety problems at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station.

The advice to keep three bases in Antarctica is expected to appear in an interagency policy review requested by the Senate appropriations panel that sets NSF's budget (*Science*, 1 December, p. 1433). The working group involved in the review presented a draft of its report last month to the Committee on Fundamental Science, part of the White House's National Science and Technology Council. During that meeting, sources say, the State Department joined NSF in arguing strongly for continuing a 1982 presidential policy directive that specifies an active U.S. presence in Antarctica, even though budgets are tight and the station can no longer be justified as a Cold War outpost.

With regard to the South Pole station, NSF officials say essential repairs must begin before the station is buried by drifting snow sometime in the next decade (*Science*, 24 June 1994, p. 1836). Although NSF would like to build a new, $200 million station, the money in its upcoming budget will be spent over the next few years on "problems that must be addressed whether or not we build a new station," says an NSF official, such as upgrading the power plant and storage facilities.

## Advisers Pan Radiation Safety Rule

A rule proposed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to crack down on misuse of medical isotopes is drawing fire from some of NRC's advisers, who object that the new policy's deadlines are too demanding and its language too murky.

The NRC's decision to issue a new rule was prompted by two incidents last year in which medical researchers at the National Institutes of Health and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology ingested radioactive tracers. NRC's response, published in the *Federal Register* on 31 January, would require licensees to report within 24 hours any unauthorized use of radioactive material—even harmless amounts—that results in an intentional exposure. If licensees can't rule out that an incident was intentional, they must call the NRC within 48 hours.

Those deadlines didn't go over well at a meeting of NRC's advisory committee on medical uses of isotopes last week in Rockville, Maryland. One adviser, radiologist Louis Wagner of the University of Texas Medical School in Houston, found NRC's language confusing: The intent "is somehow buried in the legalistic wording," he said, adding that the murkiness might lead institutions to cover up incidents instead of report them. Besides, institutions need more than 24 hours to complete their own investigations, says Washington University School of Medicine radiologist Barry Siegel, the committee's chair. He argued that it would be difficult to determine whether an exposure was intentional in so little time. The rule's ambiguity "leaves you almost having to report everything" in 24 to 48 hours, Siegel told *Science*.

NRC staffer John Glenn agrees that the agency needs to clarify the rule's language and give examples of reportable situations. The rule's public comment period was to end 1 March, but the NRC has now extended it for 60 more days.

## Fusion Backers Plead For Funds

Fusion supporters are scrambling to convince the Clinton Administration that it should go easy in cutting the beleaguered fusion program in its 1997 budget request, and they're getting a warmer reception at the White House than at the Department of Energy (DOE), which conducts this research.

Four dozen members of Congress signed a 15 February letter to DOE Secretary Hazel O'Leary and Presidential Science Adviser Jack Gibbons pleading for at least $275 million for DOE's fusion program. That's well below the current $366 million, but a sum that the White House may be willing to spend—and far more than the $200 million DOE proposed earlier this year, according to Administration and industry sources. After getting DOE's request, White House budget examiners added about $85 million more, the sources say. But they expect the number sent to Congress will likely be between $250 million and $275 million.

The lawmakers base their plea for the higher figure on advice from a panel of fusion experts who warned in January that a budget below $275 million would force DOE to take drastic steps, such as closing the Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory (*Science*, 2 February, p. 592). "Although we are all painfully aware of the severe budgetary constraints facing our nation, we must work to ensure that the U.S. fusion program is not reduced too deeply," the lawmakers write. They also urge that fusion funding not come at the expense of other DOE basic science programs.

## AIDS Office Budget Morass Settled

If you find it easier to follow the goings-on in Bosnia-Herzegovina than the battle over who controls the AIDS budget at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), you're not alone. But it seems those in charge now understand where they stand and how much control NIH's Office of AIDS Research (OAR) has over the $1.4 billion AIDS researchers receive.

On 9 February, OAR chief William Paul was informed by the Office of Management and Budget that the 1996 AIDS budget would go directly to each NIH institute. OAR, backed by the Clinton Administration, had lobbied hard to prevent this, contending the office should retain the budget authority Congress gave it 3 years ago. OAR's independence was cast into doubt by a legal technicality that Congress included in the January resolution that funded NIH through 1996 (*Science*, 19 January, p. 281). Congress did so despite protests from prominent scientists and AIDS activists that the move would prevent OAR from responding to a massive review of AIDS research.

Although OAR's Paul doesn't like the situation, he urges that people keep it in perspective. For one thing, he notes, the new rule applies only to the 1996 budget, which OAR has already shaped. Yet Paul says Congress's action "has significance," as OAR is eager to make changes in NIH's AIDS portfolio recommended by the research review. "If we had the authority this year, we would have used it," says Paul. The review is due out in April, and sources say an executive summary will be available in mid-March.