

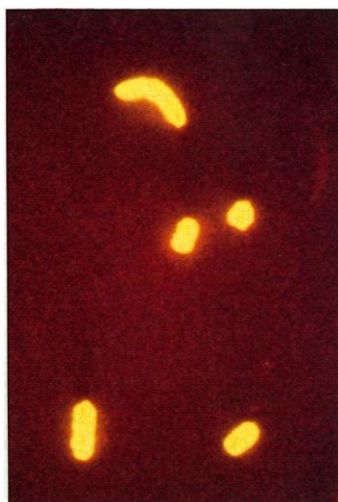
## Taking the Earth Out of NASA

Representative Robert Walker (R-PA) raised eyebrows last week among global change research advocates when he proposed a draft bill that would eliminate the U.S. space agency's charter to study the Earth. The 1958 act that created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) called for the agency to study the atmosphere and space; in 1984 that was amended with President Ronald Reagan's approval to include Earth studies as well.

A Republican staffer said that the change, contained in a draft bill that focuses on space commercialization, is designed to return NASA to what it is best at—space research. "This would not prevent the agency from conducting Earth remote sensing," he added. "That is not the intention." But Representative George Brown (D-CA), the ranking minority member of the Science Committee chaired by Walker, said the provision is just part of the Pennsylvanian's strategy to cripple environmental monitoring efforts such as NASA's Earth Observing System.

Walker last week rejected charges by critics like Brown, who says his dislike of such programs is based on politics. NASA's declining budget, he argues, simply cannot handle the huge monitoring programs the agency wants to create. Walker also accused fellow politicians and the media of distorting his views. "Instead of a healthy and scientific debate," he fumed, "this whole thing has turned into a political circus complete with name-calling."

The odds of the bill making it through Congress are slim, according to both Republican and Democratic sources. Most of the legislation deals with commercial space matters, which the Senate has shown little interest in. But many provisions could reappear in the House version of NASA's 1997 authorization bill, which Walker's committee will draft this spring.



VISUALS UNLIMITED

**Restricted access?** Terrorism worries prompt warnings on pathogens such as plague.

## Senate Calls for Pathogen Alert

Fears of biological terrorism are running high on Capitol Hill, where a Senate committee briefed on the topic last week fired off a letter to the White House urging "emergency procedures" to prevent specimens of deadly pathogens from reaching the wrong hands. As a result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an advisory on 12 March recommending that researchers take extra precautions with pathogen shipments.

The Senate's concerns stem from an incident last May in which a white separatist in Ohio ordered three vials of the bacteria that cause bubonic plague from

the American Type Culture Collection in Rockville, Maryland. The man was convicted of mail fraud for using a fake lab letterhead, but he had violated no other law.

On 6 March the Senate Judiciary Committee met to hear about House plans to add unauthorized possession of dangerous microbes to anti-terrorism laws. Then CDC officials described the efforts of an interagency group to use existing powers to prevent access to such specimens by nonlegitimate users. The plan, they said, would create within 6 months a list of risky pathogens, a registry of labs permitted to use them, and rules requiring researchers who want such materials to submit shipping forms and get institutional approval.

But that wasn't good enough for committee chair Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), who spiced up the hearing by reading from *Contagion*, a new novel by Robin Cook about a deadly epidemic spread by sabotage. Said Hatch, "I think we need to jump right on this." Hours later, his committee sent a letter to President Clinton calling for CDC to "implement on a priority basis emergency procedures" to prevent a recurrence of the Ohio incident. The CDC advisory urges researchers to be vigilant with risky pathogen shipments and announces that the proposed rules will be published within 90 days.

## Libya and Iran Seek Ex-Soviet Scientists

University representatives from Iran and Libya have stepped up efforts to woo impoverished scientists in at least three countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU)—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, say sources in those countries and the United States.

Because Iran and Libya support terrorism, the recruiting "is very disturbing," says Gerson Sher, director of the Civilian Research and Development Foundation (CRDF), a U.S. outfit that aims to keep ex-defense scientists in the FSU employed in civilian research. "It underlines the continuing reality of the threat of proliferation," he says.

In Georgia, for instance, Libyan and Iranian representatives began aggressively recruiting physicists at Tbilisi State University last fall. "It was not difficult for them to find out who the leading scientists are," says Tbilisi State semiconductor physicist Tamaz Butkhuzi. He says that both countries have offered scientists \$1000 a month for 1- or 2-year contracts. FSU scientists usually earn between \$10 and \$150 a month. So far, says Butkhuzi, one plasma physicist has gone to Iran and several other physicists have accepted contracts from Libya. The Libyans and Iranians are also wooing Azerbaijani physicists as well as Ukrainian physicists and biologists, the sources said.

It is not clear whether these scientists would pursue civilian or defense research. But the temptation for top scientists to accept such posts is bound to grow as grants from the West expire in the coming months. The CRDF's grants, expected to be announced in July, would support only a small fraction of scientists in the three nations. Researchers in ex-Soviet states say there is no sign of a mass migration to these countries. But faced with the prospect of severe underemployment, says Georgian physicist David Aladashvili, "many scientists might want to leave."

## French Agency Cracks Nest Eggs

Senior French researchers were shocked to learn recently that money they set aside for a rainy day has been reclaimed by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France's largest public research agency. The move is part of CNRS's ongoing attempt to deal with a chronic shortage of government funds.

In early January, the agency quietly transferred \$18 million in unspent funds built up as nest eggs by institutions to CNRS's central coffers, but it was only recently that lab directors discovered that fact. Now hundreds of angry scientists have signed a petition demanding that the government restore these and all previous "cancellations, cuts, and freezes" of CNRS research funds.

According to a CNRS spokesperson, at least some of the money—although it is not yet clear how much—will be redistributed to labs that are less well off. But those lab directors who have lost their savings may now be wishing they hadn't been quite so thrifty.