RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Modest Gain for Irish Science

The Irish government last week approved a budget that includes a £4.2 million ($6 million) increase for science—a 20% hike over the original 1996 allocation. But the country's basic researchers are still dissatisfied with what they perceive as their government's failure to appreciate the value of basic research. "I am very disappointed," says Mike Hopkins, a physicist at Dublin City University and former head of the Irish Scientist's Research Association (IRSA), which he founded 2 years ago to push for more basic research funding.

The increase, which appears in the budget of the Department of Enterprise and Employment, raises the department's total spending on science, technology, and innovation to about £24 million ($36 million). But of this, only £2 million will go to scientists in the form of grants for basic research. The largest chunk of the money goes for applied research and promoting technology in industry.

The situation for Ireland's basic researchers is thus still dire, according to David McCullen, head of genetics at Trinity College. McCullen recently sat on a committee evaluating 59 research proposals in genetics that were competing for a pot of £340,000. "This is what you should be spending on a single research proposal," he says, adding that without the Wellcome Foundation and the European Union there would be very little science in Ireland.

Scientists had hoped that the government would change its attitude after IRSA persuaded it to establish a panel of scientists, chaired by Dan Tierney, chair of Cross Chemicals, to look at government science policy. The so-called Tierney report recommended that the government put an additional £25 million into science, technology, and innovation in 1996, and £245 million over the succeeding 4 years. Currently, the total spent throughout the government is £750 million.

Hopkins now says he considers IRSA to have failed in its mission. Tierney, however, sees the glass as half full. Of the £4.2 million that did materialize from the government's coffers, he says: "We're quite happy that government is taking the problem a little bit seriously."

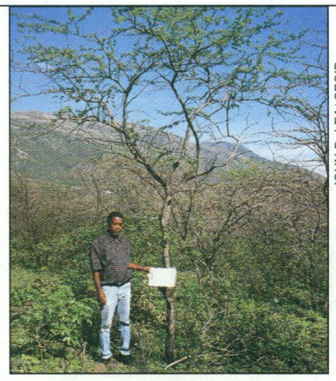
Site for Minority Scientists

Minority scientists and would-be scientists are soon to have their own home on the Internet—a "national tent," says its organizer, molecular biologist Robert P. Dottin of Hunter College in New York, to be completed later this spring. The site, at http://sonhouse.hunter.cuny.edu/JGHweb/msweb.html, will contain a cornucopia of information including news, lists of grant and fellowship programs, and links to scientific data banks as well as to other sites with information relevant to minorities. A unique feature, says Dottin, is a list of about 100 minority scientists who can be accessed via names or fields of study.

The site also provides first-person accounts of student experiences. Ismael Perez, for example, who is now pursuing graduate studies in biology at Vanderbilt University, describes how at Hunter "whenever I ventured from the true path, my mentors ... were there to shape me, [bringing out] the nerd without affecting the soft party animal inside."

The site will also act as a "broker" to hook up students with "virtual mentors." Brown University biologist James Wyche says National Academy of Sciences head Bruce Alberts has canvassed academy members and has located about 100 scientists "willing to be on tap" as mentors.

For more information on minorities in this issue, see the special section beginning on page 1901.



JOHN D. LEA/ SECID

Wonder tree? This erect, thornless mesquite may make arid lands prosper.

The Mesquite Mystique

Mesquite, once considered a nuisance by farmers and ranchers, with wood best suited for grilling chicken, may become a balm for developing countries. Mesquite, or *Prosopis*, which thrives in hot, dry places, can rejuvenate soils, stabilize land, and provide food and fuel, according to speakers at a conference* held last week in Washington, D.C.

After a decade of research on mesquite trees around the world, scientists have identified one in particular, in Peru, that is fast-growing, compact, free of the plant's trademark tire-piercing thorns, and amenable to cultivation. "For the first time, we have erect, thornless material that we can grow in three continents," says Peter Felker from Texas A&M University, Kingsville.

There are many reasons why someone would want to plant these trees, he and other scientists say. For example, in India, agronomist Gurbachan Singh, from the Central Soil Salinity Research Institute in Karnal, has demonstrated that nitrogen-fixing *Prosopis* not only raises the acid content of alkaline soil, but also dramatically increases crop yields of wheat and oats. Others reported that mesquite's ability to become a deep-rooted, sprawling ground cover can slow desert expansion by stabilizing sand dunes, as it does in Mauritania and Somalia.

And because mesquite is harder than oak and resists warping better than most other wood, Texas and Argentina are both nurturing nascent mesquite timber industries for flooring and furniture. "It's ironic, but the very same Texas ranchers whose grandfathers spent all this money and time trying to eradicate *Prosopis* are now planting it," notes Mike Benge with the U.S. Agency for International Development. And animal feed manufacturers have started buying up mesquite pods for fodder—something people did in precolumbian days, Felker notes.

Lene Poulson from the United Nation's Development Program says she hopes this meeting will lead to even more mesquite projects like Singh's. "I don't think we've taken sufficient advantage of the possibilities it offers," she says.

* "*Prosopis*: Semi-Arid Fuelwood and Forage Tree; Building Consensus for the Disenfranchised," 13 to 15 March 1996.

Honoraria Ban Lifted

High-level U.S. government scientists can start accepting payments for making speeches and writing articles unrelated to their government duties, thanks to an opinion from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Council.

The opinion, issued late last month, frees nearly all government employees from an honoraria ban enacted in 1989. In February 1995, the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional for employees below a high civil service level (GS-16, in government-speak). Now any scientist interested in teaching a chemistry class, for example, or giving a speech about 12th-century pottery can be paid so long as it doesn't have anything to do with the performance of his or her government job—and so long as the institution paying the honorarium is not also a recipient of funds over which the scientist has charge.

The ban "was somewhat demoralizing," says Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. It was "a real disincentive to recruit people."