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USDA (INSET) D. GRANATSTEIN/WSU

Back to the land. Karl Stauber will head a foundation for sustainable development projects, such as this fertilizer research.

USDA Science Chief Calls It Quits

Just a year into the job, the chief of science at the U.S. Department of Agriculture is stepping down after ruffling congressional feathers and drawing mixed reviews from the agricultural research community. Next month Karl Stauber will leave his position as USDA Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics to become CEO of the $358 million Northwest Area Foundation, a Minnesota-based philanthropy that funds programs on rural development.

Stauber's brief tenure turned particularly rocky earlier this year. His proposal to create at least 15 to 25 "world-class" research centers from the agency's 120 agricultural research stations triggered opposition from some land-grant college officials, and also from legislators worried about the impact of the downsizing on their constituents. In March, Stauber offended members of USDA's House oversight panel when he suggested that the increasingly suburban House leadership poses challenges for handling rural issues. The congressional animosity is "as deep as I've ever heard it," says Mississippi State University agriculture school Vice President Rodney Foil.

Stauber, whose background is in public policy, also admits that his proposals for tying agricultural research to social and environmental issues "made some folks within both the federal research labs and the land-grant community unhappy." But he says the White House "wanted the status quo shaken up in [these] kinds of directions," and that he's leaving not because he wasn't successful but to take advantage of "an opportunity of a lifetime." His deputy, Cathy Woteki, has been named acting director, and there is no word on a possible successor.

Dim Outlook for British Science Funding

Britain's science minister, Ian Taylor, tried to sound upbeat this week when he presented "Forward Look," the government's annual report on R&D funding. But the figures he gave were far from rosy, revealing a decline in national research spending from about $8 billion in real terms in 1985 to $7 billion in 1994. And more belt-tightening may lie ahead. Adam Ingram, spokesperson for the opposition Labour Party, notes that overall R&D spending "will continue to fall"—the report predicts a $450 million drop, in real terms, by 1998–99.

The good news is that spending on basic research, funded mostly through the universities and research councils, increased 10% between 1985 and 1994. But this seemed paltry compared to the highest levels of industrial growth. For example, the pharmaceutical sector doubled its research spending over the same period. Nor can university researchers—burdened with aging and inadequate equipment—soon expect a renovation of facilities, because capital budgets will be cut over the next 3 years. "It's a crisis turning into a calamity," says Oxford University physicist John Mulvey, spokesperson for the lobbying group Save British Science.

For the past decade, national U.K. spending on research has held stubbornly at about 2.2% of GDP—lower than in the U.K.'s main European competitors, France and Germany. The government's strategy for the future is to ask companies to invest more in R&D, for, as Taylor says, "too many companies are not doing enough." But critics hold government leaders responsible for the situation: "Their figures prove there has been a retreat from science," says Ingram. "We are stifling our science base."

Mikulski Pushes for Space Summit

The White House plan to chop NASA's budget in the coming years is raising the ire of both Democratic and Republican supporters in the Senate. Senator Kit Bond (R–MO), who chairs the panel that oversees the agency's appropriations, warned at a hearing last week that slashing today's $13.9 billion budget to $11.6 billion in 2000 would have "devastating consequences."

The proposed figures also anger Senator Barbara Mikulski (D–MD), the ranking minority member of the panel. If the Administration doesn't disavow the projections by 15 June, she said, she'll push for a meeting of congressional leaders and the president to discuss NASA's future. "This downward glide path jeopardizes the space program," she told reporters after the hearing. President Bush convened such a meeting in 1990.

Mikulski's proposal for a summit won the backing of Senator Conrad Burns (R–MT), who chairs the subcommittee that authorizes NASA funding. And NASA chief Daniel Goldin told Mikulski "we'll be supportive," although he said after the hearing that he first must consult with the Administration. Goldin told the senators he is optimistic that the White House Office of Management and Budget will increase the future-year figures.

Senator Mikulski, whose state includes Washington suburbs and NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, also criticized Goldin's plan to reduce staff at NASA headquarters by as much as half and the Administration's proposed cuts to space science.

Two for the Price of One?

A tiny program to encourage university researchers to team up with small business may get a lot bigger if the National Science Foundation (NSF) convinces the White House and Congress to merge it with a much larger program to commercialize new discoveries.

NSF is one of five federal agencies whose budgets are taxed to support the $60 million Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) program. It's a 3-year-old experiment designed to complement the $870 million Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program (*Science*, 17 May, p. 942). While SBIR helps small companies commercialize technology from any source, the STTR grants require participation by university researchers in a collaborative effort. However, STTR will end in September unless it is reauthorized by Congress.

The planned growth of both STTR and SBIR may count against them in the upcoming debate. SBIR's share of agency research budgets rises from 2% to 2.5% in October, while STTR's, now at 0.15%, would jump to 0.25% under a bill passed in March by the House Committee on Small Business. That's a lot of money for such specialized programs in a flat or shrinking budget, says Anne Petersen, deputy NSF director. Merging the two would give NSF greater flexibility "to work with the people we know best, the university community," says Petersen.

Officials at NASA and the National Institutes of Health say they also hope to limit the size of the two programs. Another option under review by the White House would cap the two programs at 2.5% of an agency's overall R&D budget.