

Earmark for New Ship Puts Academics Over Pork Barrel

There's no such thing as a free launch. That's what the U.S. academic oceanographic community is learning in the wake of a Senate proposal to give the Navy \$45 million to build a replacement research ship for the University of Hawaii. The funds, which were slipped quietly into a defense spending bill, are expected to be approved shortly by the full Senate, and such earmarks typically remain in the final version of legislation.

A \$45 million gift from Congress might seem like an unmitigated blessing, but it is producing a squall in the nation's leading oceanographic institutions. Oceanographers are grateful for congressional support for their field. But many complain that the earmark, which not only makes the University of Hawaii the home institution but declares that the ship should be a twin-hull design known as a SWATH, undermines the long-range planning process based on peer review and consensus. And for some institutions the issue may turn out to be more than a matter of principle: To hold down its costs after the new ship comes on line, the Navy could decide to retire one or more of its four other ships now being operated by academic institutions.

Also awash in the controversy generated by the earmark is the University-National Oceanographic Laboratory System (UNOLS), a consortium of institutions that manages the country's 27-ship academic fleet, which includes the Navy vessels. Members of the consortium are already struggling to find enough money to operate a growing deep-sea fleet (*Science*, 15 March, p. 1486), and some fear that the addition of this new ship could make matters worse.

"UNOLS supports the idea that Hawaii should operate a research vessel," says Jack Bash, its executive director, who says the group's governing council will discuss the matter at a meeting later this month. "But we have not decided what type of vessel, or when it should be brought into the fleet." Bash says that some members believe UNOLS should make the best of a bad situation by seeking a role in designing the new ship, a small water-plane, twin hull (SWATH) design that is more stable in rough seas than the traditional displacement hull design. But others say the proposed spending should be opposed on the grounds that it could be detrimental to the long-

range health of the field. "I think it's great that [Hawaii] has got Senators [Daniel] Inouye (D-HI), [Defense appropriations chair Ted] Stevens (R-AK), and [Majority Leader Trent] Lott (R-MS) lined up in support of oceanography," says Richard Pittinger of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, which now operates two Navy vessels. "But we need to be sure that there's money to operate the new ship,



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2 hulls better than 1? Proposed ship, like MBARI's *Western Flyer* (above), would have twin hulls for stability.



that it's the right design, and that it's awarded on the basis of an open competition."

The big winner, of course, would be the University of Hawaii, which is facing the impending loss of its Navy-owned ship, the *Moana Wave*. The 23-year-old ship is scheduled to be laid up sometime next year, says Barry Raleigh, dean of oceanography at the university. Last fall Hawaii made a bid to operate a research ship being built by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, but sources say that ship is likely to be based at a NOAA facility in Charleston, South Carolina.

So this spring university officials went the political route. "Our goal is to operate a new vessel that is stable in high seas," says Raleigh. They appealed to Inouye, the head of their state delegation and ranking minority member on the Senate defense appropriations subcommittee, who won approval last month for a \$45 million earmark in both the 1997 defense authorization and appropriations bills. The authorization bill, which was expected to be adopted this week by the full Senate, doesn't mention Hawaii. But it talks about the Navy's "backlog of survey work" and the approaching

retirement of one of its research vessels. The appropriations bill cites the *Moana Wave* by name and emphasizes how the new ship could make important contributions to science.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI), which is not a UNOLS member, recently launched a smaller SWATH vessel and hopes to demonstrate its value to researchers. Two previous classes of larger and more costly Navy SWATH ships were deemed unsuitable by UNOLS institutions for the needs of blue-water oceanography.

The earmark will have to be negotiated in conference with the House, which did not include it in either defense bill. Although it is only a tiny item in a \$245 billion bill, it has caught the eye of Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA), who chairs a spending panel that oversees the National Science Foundation (NSF). Last month his panel expressed concern about the proper balance between research and operations, and asked NSF, which owns several vessels and provides the bulk of UNOLS operating funds, for a report on how the current fleet might be affected by a "new, Navy-owned, university-operated research vessel."

Raleigh says the new ship will not increase the fleet's overall operating costs because it would replace not only the *Moana Wave* but a second ship, the *Kai'imikai O Kanaloa*, that was recently bought and renovated to serve as a tender for a small submersible vehicle based in Honolulu. "It would be a wash," he says. Raleigh also expects the new ship to satisfy the country's overall oceangoing needs. "If it's built," he says, "and if this university is involved, we'd insist on having the community set the criteria."

But cost figures are impossible to calculate until a ship has been designed, say critics. And it is not clear what legislators have in mind. The spending bill mentions another ship, being built this year for the Navy as a demonstrator and dubbed *Slice*, that is faster than existing SWATH vessels and, therefore, more economical in transit. "Most SWATH vessels are designed to go only 15 to 20 knots, and that's too slow for commercial or military purposes," says David Moran, head of industrial outreach for the Office of Naval Research. But *Slice*, he says, "is expected to top 30 knots."

Republicans hope to complete action on the defense spending bill by the end of the month. But they expect President Clinton to veto it because of additional spending that the Administration has not requested. At that rate, the research community will have plenty of time before passage of a final bill to chart its course on this latest attempt to enlarge the academic fleet.

—Jeffrey Mervis