

ENERGY RESEARCH

Political Sails Are Up for Revamping DOE

For the past 2 years, the White House has brusquely rejected demands by junior lawmakers in Congress to eliminate the \$16 billion Department of Energy (DOE). But in the more collegial atmosphere now fashionable in Washington, it may be willing to discuss a radical overhaul of the department.

Last week, the president's science adviser, Jack Gibbons, said he wants to begin a "constructive dialogue" with Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), a senior Republican and strong DOE defender who has a plan to revamp the department that would boost the profile of its multibillion-dollar research programs. If such negotiations succeed, say congressional staffers and Administration officials, the result could be big changes in DOE's sprawling network of laboratories and in disciplines ranging from high-energy physics to genetics research.

The involvement of such senior figures on both sides suggests a new willingness to come to grips with the chronic problems facing the 19-year-old agency. "You now have two major players sending positive signals," says one Republican staffer. The impending departure of Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, who has sparred bitterly with Republicans, may also help lower the temperature of the debate over DOE's future.

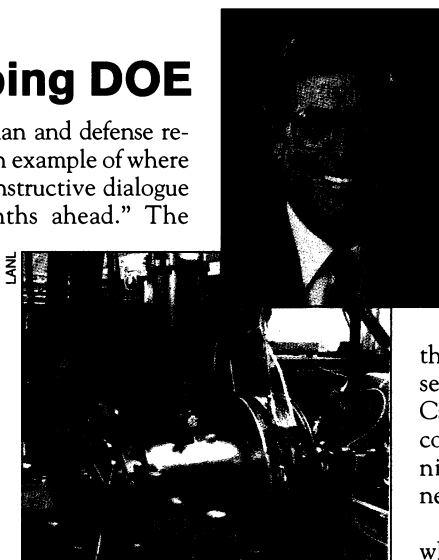
Domenici's plan, which has not yet been released, is likely to serve as the starting point for the discussion. Sources say it envisions a return to the days before the department's creation in 1977. Responsibility for nuclear weapons and energy research would remain with a civilian organization similar to the short-lived Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), DOE's predecessor. While its chief would not be a Cabinet official, sources add, the revamped agency could give science and technology a higher profile than it now has within the mammoth DOE complex.

Domenici's dissatisfaction with DOE is evident in a report that accompanies the Senate's 1997 funding bill for the agency, which his appropriations panel oversees. "The department's administration has become too cumbersome" and has lost its focus, it states. The resulting higher costs and lower output "will seriously jeopardize the future of the department." The senator didn't push the idea in the last 2 years for fear it would lend support to more radical proposals to gut the department. "Domenici was afraid such a plan would be unmanageable in the last Congress," says one Republican staffer. "He wants to keep his two labs safe." Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories are both in New Mexico.

Gibbons says he welcomes examining new

ways to tie together civilian and defense research at DOE: "This is an example of where I hope we can have a constructive dialogue in the weeks and months ahead." The Clinton Administration is likely to insist, however, that any proposal demonstrate clear savings for the taxpayer. "I am still to be convinced that any of the suggested moves ends up with a net plus," the science adviser says. "I haven't heard any scheme so far in which the pluses outweigh the minuses." Another big question is whether the bevy of congressional committees that oversee DOE—both authorizing and appropriations panels—would sanction major changes. Any attempt to alter current jurisdictions could spark a turf war, House staffers say.

Some R&D advocates say Domenici's idea of resurrecting ERDA could be advan-



Home-field advantage. New Mexico's Domenici is likely to protect Los Alamos lab in any reshuffle.

tageous for science and technology. Guyford Stever, who was science adviser to President Gerald Ford before ERDA was absorbed into DOE, looks favorably on any plan that could give R&D more clout than under the current system. But a seat at the president's Cabinet table, he adds, comes in handy in winning support for large new projects.

DOE officials, meanwhile, are waiting nervously in the wings, wondering what role their new boss will play in the drama. "I remain

open [to the idea]," says Martha Krebs, director of DOE's \$3 billion office of energy research. "Energy research can be healthy in either situation, and I am confident its value will be recognized whatever the outcome."

—Andrew Lawler

UNITED KINGDOM

Lab Privatization Program in Tatters

LONDON—The British government's effort to shift many public laboratories into the private sector appears to be in disarray after it has backed down from one privatization and put another on hold in little more than a week. With a general election looming and privatization proving expensive, the political and economic costs of going ahead are apparently proving too great. But the confusion is prompting both anger and relief among researchers.

Agriculture minister Douglas Hogg said this week that the ministry's Central Science Laboratory (CSL) would stay in the public sector. The announcement followed that of Science Minister Ian Taylor, who told Parliament on 29 November that the shift to the private sector of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) in Cambridge and the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh (ROE), announced in May, had been halted.

The Royal Observatories manage most of Britain's ground-based telescopes and develop leading-edge instruments for them. Taylor told the House of Commons that "a series of difficulties which have significant financial and legal implications" had emerged. A key problem appears to be the cost of shifting pension funds for the observatories' staff to a private body. "Staff have again been

thrown in limbo," says the ROE's head, Stuart Pitt. Jasper Wall, head of the RGO, says: "There's total dismay at the delay." Managers at both observatories had planned to make a bid themselves for the work, and have been meeting this week with officials at the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council to look at options for the future before PPARC's full council meeting on 12 December.

But at the CSL, near York, which carries out research on food, agriculture, and environmental topics following the amalgamation of several laboratories this year, the decision not to privatize was greeted with relief. "It's great news ending the uncertainty," says the laboratory's spokesperson, John Houlihan. Hogg says the decision will allow the CSL to consolidate its work and to build links with the University of York, but David Luxton, national officer for the Institute of Professions, Managers, and Specialists, which represents the lab's staff, says pension commitments again swayed the argument.

"The government is clearly in disarray," says the opposition Labour Party's science spokesperson, Adam Ingram. "They have finally been forced to admit that privatization is not in the interest of our science base."

—Nigel Williams