



KENT KNUDSON/PHOTO

Gearing up. EPA wants to improve peer review of products like vehicle emissions model.

EPA Peer Review Under Microscope

In its latest effort to bolster the science behind its rules, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is putting one manager in charge of all agency peer review—chemist Robert Hugget, who heads EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD).

Two years ago, EPA adopted a plan to increase its use of peer review, but a General Accounting Office (GAO) report last fall found that the plan was not being applied consistently. For example, agency staffers sent a key chapter of a report on dioxin risks to EPA's outside science advisory board before it was peer-reviewed. And a computer model of vehicle emissions used since 1978 had never been reviewed by outside experts. GAO urged EPA to impose "more comprehensive accountability" on its work.

The new policy is meant to do that. EPA's air, water, and other offices will still organize reviews of their reports. However, Hugget will oversee an inventory of everything to be reviewed, clarify the peer-review process by training staff, and run spot checks to ensure that the policy is being followed. "We want to make sure that [peer review] is second nature," Hugget says. EPA Deputy Administrator Fred Hansen signed the new policy earlier this week.

"It could be a very beneficial change," says Ray Loehr, an environmental engineer at the University of Texas and a sci-

tific adviser to ORD.

In the meantime, Congress may hatch its own peer-review plan for EPA. Rep. Richard Pombo (R-CA), co-chair of the GOP Environmental Task Force, expects to draft a bill requiring that new environmental rules undergo a review similar to the vetting of articles by scientific journals. Pombo is drawing on advice from EPA microbiologist David Lewis, an outspoken critic of agency science. The Fish and Wildlife Service might be covered as well, says a Pombo staffer, adding, "A lot of agencies are rife with inadequate peer review."

Surgeon to Chair Health Policy Panel

When medical researchers testify to Congress, they often simplify their message for their novice listeners. But this year, at least one chair won't need any help: Senator William Frist (R-TN), named on 7 January to head a new subcommittee of the Labor and Human Resources Committee on public health and safety, is a medical expert himself.

Frist, elected in 1994, is not

only the first M.D. since 1928 to join the Senate (where in 1995 he saved the life of a visiting constituent who collapsed with a heart attack). He's also a 1978 honors graduate of Harvard Medical School and a well-known clinical researcher. At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, he founded a transplant center in 1986 and for 8 years directed its heart-lung transplantation program.

Frist's new subcommittee will write bills that authorize half a dozen agencies, including the National Institutes of Health. In the past, Frist has followed a strict conservative line, pushing for a balanced budget, congressional term limits, and anti-abortion measures. Frist was not available last week to comment on his plans for 1997, but in a press statement, he said enacting authorization for the organ and bone-marrow transplant programs will be a top priority. The subcommittee staff director, Sue Ramthun, says her team includes two visiting fellows: physician Deborah Nichols, former geriatrics chief at the Shadyside

Hospital in Pittsburgh, and Clyde Evans, on sabbatical as associate dean for clinical affairs of Harvard Medical School.

And the senator has another ace up his sleeve: His brother, Thomas Frist Jr., is vice chair of the board of Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corp. of Nashville, the nation's largest private hospital company. While Thomas Frist may have a financial stake in how the senator votes on some issues, this won't cause ethics problems, according to the senator's press secretary, Keith Still. Her boss "checked it out with the ethics committee," Still says, and the panel "cleared him of any conflict of interest."

Veteran Senate R&D Staffer Makes an Exit

The Senate is losing a staffer whom government officials describe as Congress's institutional memory on science and technology issues. Stephen Kohashi is leaving his job next month as clerk of the Senate appropriations panel that oversees NASA and the National Science Foundation. Kohashi has served Republicans on the panel for 12 of his 23 years on Capitol Hill. But Senator Kit Bond (R-MO) wants to give the job to John Kamarck, a former Bond staffer who currently works for the Banking Committee and was chosen for his close ties to Bond as well as expertise in housing.

Kohashi won NASA's admiration for playing a key role in winning a \$2 billion appropriation to build a replacement orbiter after the Challenger exploded, and for his behind-the-scenes defense of the space station and science programs such as the U.S.-Russian Bion effort. Kohashi himself says he provided "continuity" on Capitol Hill "through some tumultuous periods for the agency." The 47-year-old Kohashi says he's not sure what he will do next, but sources predict he'll take a science and technology post with the government or an aerospace company.

Arctic Data Trove for Ocean Scientists

Ocean researchers are digging into 45 years of data on the Arctic Ocean recently declassified by the United States and Russia. Earlier this week, Vice President Al Gore announced the release of the first volume of a CD-ROM ocean atlas made from 1.3 million observations of winter temperatures and salinity. Some of the data were used to create this new model (right) of Arctic Ocean temperatures, featured in the February *National Geographic*.

The atlas, one fruit of an environmental task force set up 5 years ago by Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, will be useful for honing ocean climate models and predicting pollution. "This really is the only data" for the middle of the Arctic, says oceanographer James Morison of the University of Washington. Later volumes will feature data on Arctic ice and meteorology. Scientists can view the new atlas and order the CD-ROM at <http://ns.noaa.gov/atlas>.

