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Bull's-eye? Could line-item veto be used to curb projects like sunflower insect research?

USDA Earmarks: Target for Veto?

As the 1998 federal budget process got under way this week with the release of the Clinton Administration's request to Congress, some lawmakers were wondering whether the president might wield a power they bestowed on him last year—the line-item veto—to exert pressure on earmarked science projects.

Among those who take this possibility seriously are members of the Senate committee that oversees the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), an agency laden with earmarks. The committee's concern is apparent in a recent letter that Chair Richard Lugar (R-IN) sent to ag interest groups and agencies, listing questions that may come up in hearings set for mid-March. In his letter, Lugar asks whether the line-item veto might be used on USDA's \$50 million worth of "special research grants." These grants are meant to address high-priority problems, but many—including projects like \$162,000

for peach tree studies in South Carolina and \$127,000 for sunflower insect research in the Dakotas—are often labeled by critics as pork-barrel projects, because they end up in the districts of the legislators who proposed them.

They could also become tempting targets for a budget-cutting president, who as of 1 January can threaten a line-item veto to dispose of them. The special grants "may not be perceived as being in the broadest public interest," an ag committee staffer says. And the line-item veto, notes Robert Reischauer of the Brookings Institution, can be used to cut items out of bills and congressional reports.

While the president's new power could upset traditions in agricultural research, some scientists will welcome it, if it curbs the practice of earmarking grants. There are "justified reasons" for the grants, says Robert Zimbelman of the Coalition on Funding Agricultural Research Missions, "but they ought to be competitively funded."

Booster Shot for Japanese Science

Continuing bad news for Japan's economy is, once again, good news for public-sector research. Last week, the Diet, Japan's parliament, approved \$1.3 billion

for science-related spending as part of a \$21.9 billion supplemental budget intended to jump start the economy.

Most of the science spending will go for facilities and equipment. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (Monbusho), for example, is getting \$520 million, nearly all of which will supplement ongoing efforts to refurbish university labs. Monbusho also got \$32 million for Japan's role in planning the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Geneva. Several large domestic projects—including work on the international space station and the Super Photon Ring 8-GeV (SPRING 8) synchrotron under construction near Kobe—are also receiving new money. Another \$272 million going to the trade and industry ministry will be spent mostly on small grants to companies to support research in emerging industries and information technologies.

The government has adopted supplemental budgets nearly every year since economic growth fizzled in the early 1990s, and some of the spending has been criticized as wasteful political pork. But most think the money targeted for science is being well spent, and scientists certainly welcome it. Says Hiromichi Kamitsubo, an official involved with SPRING 8, "The powerful support this project has received has been very beneficial."

Xenotransplant Risks To Be Aired at Forum

Last year, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) seemed on the verge of giving the go-ahead to researchers to transplant animal organs into humans. But continuing concern about the infectious-disease risks of xenotransplants has convinced officials they should keep the brakes on while discussion continues.

One reason FDA is hesitating is that it received a strong reaction to xenotransplant safety guidelines it proposed with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other agencies last September. Until then, only a few scientists—notably AIDS researcher Jon Allan of the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research—had spoken out against xenotransplants.

But among the nearly 150 comments received since December, says FDA's Amy Patterson, "10% to 20%" are letters of concern from infectious-disease experts, including one signed by Allan and 43 other virologists. They are worried, among other things, about the use of organs from primates, considered riskier than pig organs as a source of novel pathogens that might infect humans, and about the need to clarify that any procedure would require FDA approval. Says Phil Noguchi, head of FDA's division of cell and gene therapy, "It now seems there's a body of investigators more publicly vocal in their concerns."

FDA and NIH have decided to hold two public workshops in the coming months for researchers to discuss the risks and the latest science. Noguchi says he can't predict whether this will lead to "just tweaking" the guidelines or "more discussion." And Patterson adds that "the whole gamut" of issues will be on the table—even whether primate transplants should be allowed. "If somebody comes up with some really compelling data," Patterson says, "I think we would need to reconsider."

U.S. and Russian Foundations Ink Joint Research Deal

In a move that firms up support for peer-reviewed Russian science, the heads of the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) earlier this week signed an agreement to review and fund several dozen collaborations a year between U.S. and Russian scientists.

The agreement, inked in Washington at a summit between U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, represents another step by Western organizations to wean top Russian scientists off direct aid and support them through competitive, peer-reviewed grants. The deal calls for no new U.S. funds, so NSF plans to continue spending about \$4 million a year on U.S.-

Russian collaborations, says NSF's Alexandra Stepanian. But it will add a layer of peer review on the Russian side. Previously, the Russian Academy of Sciences worked with NSF to administer the grants, but without peer review. RFBR will also foot some grant costs, which Stepanian says RFBR has offered to do "from the beginning." She adds: "That's the critical element," as past NSF-sponsored collaborations have received scant Russian funding.

NSF now supports about 100 U.S.-Russian projects, a total likely to rise only slightly, Stepanian says. But starting with the next round of awards this year, the funding bodies will solicit joint proposals in all fields and separately peer-review the proposals, then meet to choose which projects to fund.