

## NRC Lets a Little Sun Shine In

Change is hard for any organization, but officials at the National Research Council (NRC) have decided that, if it is inevitable, they'd rather be calling the shots. Faced with the prospect that the courts eventually could force it to abide by strict government rules on openness, the council recently approved new guidelines intended to open its inner workings "to the greatest extent possible." But the new rules fall far short of the government rules, and they appear unlikely to quiet critics.

The new policy has been in the works for more than a year at the NRC—the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine that produces authoritative reports for those who make public policy (*Science*, 9 May, p. 900). But progress toward openness had been slowed by internal dissent. Early this year, however, environmental and animal-rights groups scored victories in two court cases that challenge the traditional secrecy with which the council does business (*Science*, 17 January, p. 297).

The groups want the NRC to abide by the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), which specifies policies that government agencies using outside counsel must follow to ensure public input. In one case, a federal court refused to allow the U.S. Department of Energy to use an NRC report it requested; in another, the court has agreed that the council should have abided by FACA in conducting an animal case study for the National Institutes of Health. NRC officials intend to appeal the latter case to the Supreme Court, says Executive Officer William Colglazier. The officials worry that the cases might end with a ruling forcing them to adhere to FACA.

Given these external threats, "this time there was very little opposition" to the openness guidelines, says Colglazier. The council's governing board adopted the measures on 14 May.

Until now, meetings to discuss or prepare NRC reports typically were closed to all but committee members and staff. The rationale was that publicity could damage the institution's reputation for independence and fairness. The new policy, however, says that the council's work "can benefit from increased public access and increased opportunities for public input" at those meetings in which panel members are gathering information. That openness must be balanced by assurances that "committees and panels are shielded from undue pressures."

"The institution retains the right to close meetings as appropriate," the policy states,

"to conduct work free from external influences." But Colglazier says there must be compelling reasons for a committee to operate in private. "We will make it extremely rare that information-gathering meetings are closed," he says. Panel members also will be expected to discuss their potential biases during an open session at the start of their work.

The policy went into effect immediately. Last week, the NRC set up a World Wide Web site to provide up to 2 months' notice of open meetings ([www2.nas.edu/whatsnew/events.html](http://www2.nas.edu/whatsnew/events.html)).

While the new rules reflect a major change from past practices, they fall far short of the FACA requirements. Under that law, all ses-

sions of advisory panels must be open, unless they involve classified or proprietary material or personnel matters. Agency chiefs cannot overrule the law, although federal advisory committees often skirt the rules by holding closed-door executive sessions.

Colglazier says the new rules are not designed to placate the courts or critics, but he hopes they "will buy us some goodwill" among opponents. However, that might be wishful thinking. "The effect [of the new policy] is minimal," says Valerie Stanley, legal counsel for the Animal Legal Defense Fund, which is suing the National Institutes of Health over its sponsorship of an NRC study on animal protection that followed the usual council procedures. "The meetings in which they set policy won't be open, and that's at the heart of what they do."

—Andrew Lawler

### 1998 BUDGET



## Five-Year Plan Squeezes R&D

The dust surrounding the historic budget agreement between the Administration and Congress is starting to settle, and the emerging picture is not a pretty one for science and technology spending. A long-term budget plan based on that agreement was approved last week by the House and Senate, and it leaves no room for an R&D funding increase in the next 5 years. While the projections are far from immutable, they are raising concerns among R&D supporters in Congress.

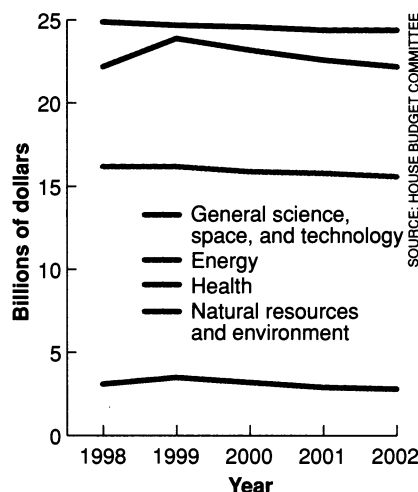
The budget resolution, which sets broad spending guidelines for the next 5 years, is the result of a bipartisan attempt by President Bill Clinton and Republican leaders to cut taxes and eliminate the federal deficit by 2002. That political consensus makes the resolution a more significant document

substantial freedom each year to fund what they see fit.

If the numbers in the resolution come to pass, warns House Science Committee Chair James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), "we'll be spending less in 2002 on scientific research ... than we did in 1991" after taking inflation into account. That reduction is the result of a decision to erase the deficit largely by reducing domestic discretionary spending, the account which includes all civilian science and technology. The budget resolution calls for a freeze or slight decrease in most R&D-related accounts as part of that effort. The only R&D-related area that the Administration and Congress singled out to protect is the Commerce Department's National Institute of Standards and Technology, which oversees the controversial Advanced Technology Program. ATP has been the object of a tug-of-war between

some Republicans, who see it as corporate welfare, and the president, who regards it as a vital link between government and industry.

Funding for the natural sciences, including research at NASA, the National Science Foundation, and physics programs within the Department of Energy (DOE), would take a "pretty significant hit" under the plan, says Sensenbrenner, who told a recent meeting of science writers that he was "dismayed" by the numbers



**Flat-lined.** R&D doesn't even keep up with inflation in the budget resolution.