RUSSIA

Science Agency Hit With 55% Cut

MOSCOW—In an effort to eliminate an $18.5 billion budget deficit, the Russian government announced late last month that it will slash this year's funding to the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), and many other government agencies, by 55%. The new RFBR head, Mikhail Alfimov, says the cuts will damage the majority of research programs supported by the foundation and undermine reforms intended to establish a system of competitive financing of research. "These measures destroy the infrastructure of science. The RFBR has just established itself as a new-style funding body, which marks a new approach to the structure of science, and now it's all under threat," Alfimov says.

The cuts are part of a major budget "sequestration" begun in April by the new deputy prime minister, Anatoly Chubais. The government originally hoped to avoid cutting certain "protected items," including science, but in desperation it has decided that all items in the budget except salaries should be cut in equal proportion. Although the sequestration has not yet been approved by the Duma (the lower house of the parliament), the finance ministry has already started to reassess current funding levels.

In addition to the RFBR, the government will cut all federal research programs funded on a competitive basis and trim the budget of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) by 25%—a smaller amount because much of its spending is on salaries. As a result, Mikhail Glubokovsky, deputy head of the Duma committee on science and education, told *Science*, the balance will tip away from competitive funding toward the centrally funded RAS. "The Cabinet has taken the liberty of ... reconsidering state priorities. It's a structural counterrevolution," he says.

Alfimov worries that researchers will stop applying to the RFBR if the success rate of applications drops too low. Already, the RFBR can fund only 20% of applications, and although it received a big boost in funding for 1997, the cuts will bring it below 1996 levels. "If we don't have the money, researchers will stop applying to us. Who would want to spend a great deal of his effort and time to get nothing in the end?"

Glubokovsky sees two ways out of the crisis: The Duma could pass a new law making it impossible for the government to cut protected items of the budget, or—much likelier, he says—it will simply delay a decision on the sequestration law for as long as possible. This has been hinted at by the Duma's Communist Speaker Gennady Seleznev, who in a recent interview outlined a lengthy procedure for polling all the regional administrations in Russia for approval of the sequestration law.

Meanwhile, the recently appointed deputy prime minister in charge of science and technology, Mikhail Bulgak, has announced plans that could pave the way for closing some of the huge number of research institutes left over from the Soviet era. Bulgak wants to begin immediately classifying institutions based on the quality of their research and then fund them accordingly. Institutes carrying out world-class science would be in the first grade, those with research of national importance in the second, and the rest in a third grade.

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Reformer. Deputy Premier Mikhail Bulgak.

Gennady Tereshenko, deputy minister of science, says institutions would be graded by a panel consisting of ministry of science officials and representatives of the Russian scientific community. Former Science Minister Boris Saltykov told *Science* that he supports Bulgak's new initiative entirely, but he expects it will be opposed by "the lazy elite" of academicians and institute directors. "I assure you this opposition will be very active," he says.

–Andrey Allakhverdov and Vladimir Pokrovsky

Allakhverdov and Pokrovsky are writers in Moscow.

INTERNET INITIATIVE

A Networking Plan for the Rich States?

A $100 million a year proposal by the Clinton Administration to connect more than 100 universities and laboratories to a faster and more capable computer network ran into its first serious opposition last week as legislators complained that it would leave poorer states behind. "I think you should go back to the drawing board," Senator Ted Stevens (R–AK), chair of the powerful Appropriations Committee, advised a group of federal officials testifying about the Next Generation Internet (NGI) initiative before a subgroup of the Senate Commerce Committee. "The institutions you're supporting, they don't need you—and we do."

"I think you should go back to the drawing board."

—Sen. Ted Stevens (R–AK)

Stevens and others are concerned that a separate set of research networking grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF), seen as paving the way for NGI, have gone mostly to elite universities in wealthier states. They also have complained that an advisory committee reviewing federal information technology programs is stacked with representatives from California and, therefore, likely to ignore rural needs. Government officials say, however, that NGI is a research project and that quality rules.

The NGI is designed to give thousands of researchers the chance not only to exchange large databases and carry out joint research but also to develop better technologies and new uses for such an electronic superhighway (*Science*, 7 March, p. 1412). "This is an experimental project that's intended to push the technology," NSF director Neal Lane told communications subcommittee chair Conrad Burns (R–MT).

Last month, NSF announced 21 grants, averaging $600,000, to 35 institutions to allow them to communicate at speeds of 155 million bits a second on NSF's fledgling very high speed Backbone Network Service. Program officials say those connection awards, combined with an earlier round of grants last summer, bring them more than halfway toward one of NGI's goals: to connect 100 sites at 100 times the speed of the existing Internet. But some legislators complain that few of the institutions chosen so far are in rural states. "Why would you proceed with a project that will further isolate the rural communities?" Stevens asked Lane. "You're using federal funds to help those who have already benefited from the system."

In response, agency officials say they see the NGI as a scientific work in progress, not just a new electronic highway. "We're looking for the best ideas, and geographic distribution is not a criterion," says NSF's Mark Luker, who runs NSF's $20 million a year connections program. John Connally, whose Center for Computational Research at the University of Kentucky received one of NSF's new connection grants, says, "My advice to the have-not states is to send in a proposal and tell NSF what research you want to do [on the network]."