wildlife biologist who works for a public interest law firm in Washington, D.C. "There is just no way he can be objective."

Cheville insists otherwise. "I wouldn't take the job if there was a possibility of bias or skewed information," he says. "We will provide the facts." Council officials add that they will soon hire a second investigator—a university wildlife biologist—to complement Cheville. The NRC plans a public hearing in Bozeman, Montana, at the end of July to kick off the study.

Park Service officials say they are happy with the arrangement, although a committee would have been preferable. "It's the best we can get right now," says Michael Soukup, who directs the Park Service's natural resource stewardship and science program. "We need to take action." He adds that the NRC "swore up and down" that the quality of the study would be comparable to an NRC committee report.

Colglazier says the study will undergo the same intensive reviews given to committee reports: "It's certainly different from an NRC committee report, but it will get the same stamp of approval." He adds, "We will have to be even more stringent" in assessing the bias and possible conflicts of interest of principal investigators. "It's a real challenge."

One council staffer who directs committee reports agrees that "it can be done with integrity, but it requires more work." Finding a researcher to accept what amounts to a full-time job as an investigator, for example, is harder than asking scientists to meet for a few days, the staffer adds.

Thomas Cochran, a physicist who works for the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, which is involved in one of the lawsuits against the NRC, says the council is sacrificing quality to avoid the law. "Which will produce the better result—a committee [that follows the government rules] or an individual writing a report that goes through their review process?" he asks.

That message is not lost on Risser, who agrees with the need to avoid legal challenges but is concerned with the long-term implications. "We can't stick our heads in the sand" and hope legal threats go away, Risser says. "But I fear for the reputation of the NRC in the long term."

For now, however, the council is moving ahead with the idea. Colglazier says he expects to see four or five more studies follow the new approach in coming weeks.

–Andrew Lawler

REGIONAL SCIENCE

NSF Offers Carrot to 'Needy' States

Phil Boudjouk, a chemist at North Dakota State University in Fargo, knows his state is no research powerhouse. Indeed, the latest state rankings from the National Science Foundation put North Dakota dead last in the amount of money coming from NSF, and 48th when all federal research agencies are included. But Boudjouk believes there are individual North Dakota scientists who can hold their own in a national competition for research grants. This fall, his faith will be put to the test.

NSF is implementing new guidelines* for its 17-year-old Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR), which is designed to give a boost to states lacking a strong research base. EPSCoR had given researchers in these states a chance to compete for a share of a small but protected pool of money, but the new rules offer a financial incentive for these researchers to plunge into NSF's nationwide competition for funding. If they do well, their success could one day close down the very program that nurtured them.

"It's an excellent concept, and a critical step for scientists from EPSCoR states to make the leap into the big pool," says Boudjouk, who also heads the state's EPSCoR activity. "Is it the beginning of the end for this program? Perhaps, although it may take longer than 3 or 4 years."

Congress created this initiative in 1979 as a counterweight to the geographic imbalance in the distribution of federal research dollars—in particular, the relative dearth of money going to the South and upper Midwest. A state's eligibility is determined largely by how much federal and NSF research funding it receives and its number of scientists per capita. A favorite among congressional delegations from poor and rural areas, EPSCoR has grown from five states sharing $3 million into a $38-million-a-year program in 18 states and Puerto Rico (see map). And its popularity has spawned similar efforts in other federal agencies.

Have-not heartland. Science-poor states in NSF program are clustered in nation's midsection.

Under the existing NSF program, states can receive up to $1.5 million a year to develop the infrastructure needed for science (large equipment, computing power, and the like) and to fund individual and small-group research projects in areas deemed important to the state's scientific and economic growth. Last year, about 1100 researchers were supported by peer-reviewed EPSCoR grants.

NSF has decided to replace this arrangement with 3-year cooperative agreements that change the rules. A portion of the total program budget—some $10 million set aside for investigator grants—would be pooled with a similar amount drawn from NSF's regular research account. Scientists who previously submitted their proposals for the smaller but sheltered pot of EPSCoR money within their states will now compete in the stiffer nationwide competition; those earning the best reviews would receive funding from NSF's regular research directorates.

The bonus would kick in for those just below the first cut: Program managers will be able to stretch their budgets by using the pot to fund half the cost of well-reviewed proposals from EPSCoR states. That arrangement also benefits the states. "A state could double its research funding," explains Richard Anderson, who runs NSF's EPSCoR program. "We see it as quite an incentive [to participate]."

NSF officials are hoping that scientists from EPSCoR states will move more quickly into mainstream funding if their grants are reviewed along with everybody else's. "We've found that faculty don't graduate as quickly as we'd like," NSF director Neal Lane last month told a Senate committee, whose members voiced strong support for the new approach.

Boudjouk predicts that as many as half of the 80 North Dakota researchers who have received small EPSCoR grants will eventually snare a larger, NSF-wide grant. "I think most of our successes will come in the third year," he says, "because it usually takes more than one application to win an award. But I feel we're definitely ready to compete with everybody else."

–Jeffrey Mervis

* Publication number NSF 9751, on the Internet at: www.nsf.gov/pubs/1997/nsf9751/nsf9751.htm