SPACE STATION

Senate Raps NASA on Cost Overruns

A powerful Senate committee chair said last week that he may try to curb cost overruns on the international space station by imposing a new ceiling on annual outlays for the project. Agency managers fear a new cap could trigger yet another redesign, and station supporters worry that any major changes could doom the program, which is scheduled to launch its first components in June 1998. The move comes just 1 month after NASA managers succeeded in calming angry House lawmakers, who felt Russia was reneging on its promised contribution.

The latest threat to the $30 billion project came at an 18 June hearing, when Senate Commerce Committee Chair John McCain (R–AZ) surprised NASA officials by calling for a comprehensive cap to hold the space agency more accountable for cost overruns. However, McCain, who supports the station, did not propose a specific figure. The same day, the General Accounting Office (GAO) warned that U.S. contractor overruns have reached $300 million, triple the level of a year ago. The problem, combined with Russia's tardiness in meeting its commitments, has caused a contingency fund to shrink much faster than planned, GAO said. The bad news for scientists is that NASA has used space shuttle and station science-facility funds to keep the lab on track.

The Administration and Congress informally agreed to a $2.1 billion annual limit on station funding in 1993. But GAO's Thomas Schulz warned Congress that "the station is going to cost more than the [current] cap allows." A Senate aide was even more critical. "It's not a real cost cap—it's a fiction," says the aide. "NASA is playing a shell game."

While admitting that the station's problems are severe, NASA managers say they are reluctant to alter the program. "I have no problems with reviews, but I worry about redesigns," NASA Administrator Dan Goldin told McCain. "I don't think this program could survive another one."

McCain's proposal would include shuttle and civil service costs associated with the station program, which do not fall within the $2.1 billion figure. The new number—which almost certainly would be higher than the current limit because of the additional elements—could appear in Senate legislation authorizing NASA's 1998 funding, say congressional staffers. NASA managers say they will cooperate, but privately complain that there is too much uncertainty in the program to commit to a specific figure.

The GAO report, meanwhile, had harsh words for Boeing, the station's prime U.S. contractor, whose performance it said "showed signs of deterioration last year, [and] has continued to decline virtually unabated." The company washed out in its last performance review, scoring zero out of 100 and forfeiting up to $33 million in incentive payments, say NASA officials. In an 18 June letter to NASA space flight chief Wilbur Trafton, Boeing defense and space group president Alan Mulally pledged to tighten oversight of subcontractors and keep to the schedule for major hardware.

The problems with Russia and Boeing leave NASA with little room to maneuver. A reserve fund has already dropped from almost $3 billion last spring to $2.2 billion, the GAO noted, and it is expected to shrink to $1.4 billion by October.

Some are skeptical, however, that McCain's proposal will make a difference. "Congress has voted 16 times over the past 14 years to keep the program and has shelled out $18 billion," says Marcia Smith, an analyst at the Congressional Research Service. With the first launch only a year away, she says it seems unlikely that Congress would cancel the effort, even if NASA exceeded a revised cap.

–Andrew Lawler

PACIFIC RIM

Labs Form Biomedical Network

TOKYO—Biomedical scientists from more than a dozen institutions throughout the Pacific Rim are meeting here this weekend to launch an association to foster molecular biology and related research throughout the region. If all goes well—and if they can find the money—the researchers hope someday to develop into an organization with its own world-class laboratories.

The idea for the tentatively named International Molecular Biology Network of Asia Pacific Rim grew out of a 4-year-old collaboration between the University of Tokyo's Institute of Medical Science and the Institute for Molecular Biology and Genetics at Seoul National University (SNU). Reciprocal annual meetings have spawned activities that have aided both institutions. When SNU virologist Sunyoung Kim wanted to study the interaction between two proteins, for example, he sent a graduate student to Tokyo to take advantage of an assay developed there. "If we wanted to set up [the experiment] in my lab in Korea, it would take 6 months," Kim says. "We did it [in Tokyo] in 10 days."

The goal of the new organization, says Ken-ichi Arai, a molecular biologist at the Tokyo institute, is "to extend this type of interaction to other countries in the region." The organizers received an enthusiastic response from a collection of institutions so loosely defined that it included Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science. "For those of us in the Asia-Pacific region, it will be very useful to have an organization that will allow us to interact a bit more closely," says Nick Nicola, assistant director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Parkville, Australia. Y. H. Tan, director of the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology at the National University of Singapore, thinks that the effort to enhance collaboration is "a great idea," although he worries about the organization being dominated by one or two countries.

D. NORMILE

A net gain. Arai *(left)* and Yim hope new biology network will serve all of Asia.

One way to avoid that situation, says microbiologist Jeongbin Yim, director of SNU's institute and a co-organizer of the nascent organization, is to have scientists chart the association's future. For that reason, the first step is likely to be a series of get-acquainted research conferences, along with an exchange of postdoctoral researchers. Arai also anticipates using a World Wide Web page to help participants keep in touch. His model is the European Molecular Biology Organization, which started as a loose network of European institutions and has since acquired laboratories and a means to support research.

Obtaining a dependable source of funding will be a major challenge, however. Yim and Arai tapped corporate contributions and government grants to subsidize the inaugural gathering, but participants probably will have to pay their own way to future meetings. Still, Arai hopes that the positive reaction to the initial meeting will convince governments that supporting this fledgling organization is in their own, long-term interest.

–Dennis Normile