

NSF Asked to Consider Environment Institute

Proponents of a National Institute for the Environment (NIE) have given up lobbying for a free-standing federal institute and are now hoping to find happiness under the wing of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Last week, the House Appropriations Committee directed NSF to study "how it would establish and operate such an institute" and to report back by 1 April next year. But there's a catch: NSF isn't too keen on the idea.

The NIE was envisioned years ago as a \$500 million enterprise that would fill gaps in environmental science by funding education and peer-reviewed research not tied to a regulatory agenda. But fiscal realities, plus a lack of enthusiasm from the Clinton Administration, have prevented the idea from gaining much momentum. So Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ) decided to ask NSF what it thinks about setting up a more modest institute.

NSF officials worry that any funds for NIE would have to come from existing programs. Legislative analyst Joel Widder says that NSF's study will assess whether such an institute would offer any "value added" to the foundation's "fairly hefty" environmental portfolio. Frelinghuysen, says a spokesperson, "just wants to find out more about it."



MONTE WESTERFIELD

Going fishing. Canadians hope private money could revive genome program, which included physical mapping of the zebrafish genome.

Canada Seeks to Revive Genome Project

Canada's main sponsor of biomedical research, the Medical Research Council (MRC), is trying to rebuild Canada's genome program after it was recently dismantled by budget cuts. Last week, the agency created a high-level committee of scientists to explore new ways of funding genome studies, perhaps with private money. The eight-member panel is chaired by Lap-Chee Tsui, a geneticist at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children, co-discoverer of a gene that causes cystic fibrosis.

The defunct research effort, known as the Canadian Genome Analysis and Technology Program (CGAT), began in 1992 as a \$22 million program to fund everything from ethics studies to mapping of human chromosomes and the genomes of model organisms like the zebrafish. But the cash-strapped Canadian government is in the midst of a 5-year budget-cutting effort that meant CGAT had to be sacri-

ficed (*Science*, 16 August 1996, p. 867). This summer, the last of CGAT's grants will run out; administrative funds dried up in March. MRC is providing \$1 million in new grant money, but that's only enough to support five winners, announced this month, out of 13 CGAT projects that applied for support, says Karl Tibelius, MRC deputy director for programs. At least two special projects will also continue, including a national genomics resource and training center run by Tsui.

The search for new backers of a CGAT-like program has already begun, says Tsui, who organized the first meeting of his panel by phone last week. But he acknowledges that the committee faces an uphill battle. Attempts to form government-industry joint projects in genome research failed last year. The trouble, says Tsui, is that venture capitalists are "looking for a return on their investment," and basic science just can't promise a quick payoff. "The government has to play a role" in funding, he believes. But the government is broke. Finding new money for genomics research, Tsui says, "is going to be tough."

Congress Tinkers With Internet Upgrade

Congress has begun to rearrange the Administration's Next Generation Internet (NGI) initiative, leaving agencies scrambling to protect their share of a proposed \$100-million-a-year project to connect hundreds of research universities to a faster, more capable computer network.

Because NGI is an interagency effort, its budget is approved piecemeal by various spending panels. Combined with the concerns of some lawmakers for their districts, the result is a patchwork of conflicting interests. For the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), for example, which has requested \$40 million, a House bill provides \$55 million—including \$15 million for regional networks—while a Senate bill knocks the total down to \$10 million. The House proposal reflects the interest of Representative Curt Weldon (R-PA) in a Philadelphia-area consortium that hopes to link up hospitals, schools, universities, and businesses. In contrast, the Senate level conveys the concerns of Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) that any upgrade will leave out his isolated state.

The Department of Energy (DOE) is supposed to get the next largest share of money, some \$35 million. But both House and Senate panels have stripped the entire amount from their energy spending bills, arguing that the private sector is already investing adequately. A House aide says its panel was also miffed that DOE planned to transfer some funds to the National Science Foundation (NSF) to speed up NSF's connections program for universities. But that idea is fine with House members who oversee NSF's budget: They added \$13 million to NSF's \$10 million request for the connections plan.

Tom Kalil of the White House National Economic Council says "we're concerned about some of the marks, [but] hopeful that in the end we can achieve full funding."

ATP Regains Its Footing

The Advanced Technology Program (ATP), which the Clinton Administration has fought to keep afloat in the face of a 2-year gale of criticism from Congress, now seems headed for calmer seas.

Last week, spending panels in the House and Senate set 1998 funding levels of \$185 million and \$200 million, respectively, for the 7-year-old Commerce Department program, which offers grants to industrial and academic consortia to explore new technologies. While the numbers fall short of the Administration's request for \$275 million and are below ATP's current budget of \$225 million, they are seen as a major victory for the program. Just 18 months ago, for example, President Clinton vetoed a spending bill that defunded ATP.

"I was expecting zero," admits ATP director Lura Powell about the Senate figure. "We had one foot in

the grave, but now we can move forward." Although the House and Senate must still agree on a final budget, Powell said that the votes give a green light to companies uncertain about whether to team up on joint projects.

Supporters credit a new Senate science and technology caucus led by William Frist (R-TN) and Joe Lieberman (D-CT) with helping to change the mood in Congress. New policies adopted by Commerce last week that give a larger role to small- and medium-sized businesses and raise the minimum contribution from big companies working on their own have also made the program more palatable. "We were already moving in that direction, but this spells it out in a way that matches congressional priorities," says Mary Good, who retired last month as Commerce undersecretary for technology.