



NEAR and far. NASA has outlined sequels to projects like the NEAR spacecraft for studying asteroids.

Mixed Review for NASA Exploration Plan

For nearly 2 years, NASA has been trying to define a long-term plan for robotic space exploration, and the most recent version of its agenda through 2020 has won praise from a National Research Council (NRC) panel for clarity and coherence. But panel members also criticized NASA for vagueness on budgets and timetables, among other defects.

NASA's draft plan—its first attempt to spell out formally what its new cheaper and faster missions will do—is the result of an intensive series of workshops, meetings, and exchanges between NASA and the community. It calls for more than a dozen ambitious missions, including an orbiting observatory to search for planets and a deep-space probe that could travel nearly a billion miles a year.

But while the NRC's Space Studies Board, headed by Massachusetts Institute of Technology astrophysicist Claude Canizares, praised the plan's vision last month, it complained that the document has several flaws. According to the board, it fails to emphasize the importance of funding data analysis, neglects the need to continue some current missions such as those examining the sun's effect on Earth, and lacks adequate budgets and timetables. Furthermore, the panel said, NASA did not suggest ways to improve the interaction between university scientists and industry technologists.

NASA officials respond that because the plan aims to provide a broad view of the program's

direction, it is necessarily vague. And they note that omitting budgets and timetables was deliberate. "Budgets may change, but the plan [won't]—though it may take longer to accomplish" if the budget shrinks, says one agency manager. An internal advisory panel will review the final plan for approval later this month.

EPA Scientist's Views Spark Agency Reaction

An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) researcher who says he's being punished for criticizing the agency in print will present his case next week to a federal judge. But EPA officials say the scientist, who has been asked to help a lawmaker draft legislation requiring proposed regulations to go through peer review, may have violated rules governing public activities of federal employees.

The case involves microbiologist David Lewis of EPA's Athens, Georgia, ecosystems lab, who argued in a two-page commentary in *Nature* in June 1996 that recent changes at EPA have crippled its ability to do good science. Last fall, Lewis learned that EPA ethics officials were investigating whether he made it clear in that article, and in a similar piece in a local newspa-

per, that he was not representing the agency. In a complaint to the Labor Department, Lewis said his writings were protected by whistleblower provisions in environmental laws. He also argued that EPA was dragging its feet on a request from Representative Richard Pombo (R-CA) to allow Lewis to help draft a bill to require more rigorous scientific review of new regulations.

Last January, the Labor wage and hour division in Atlanta ruled that EPA had applied its ethics rules with "discrimination" and ordered the agency not to use the ethics allegations "as a reason to deny" Lewis's assignment to Congress. The EPA requested a hearing, and a federal administrative law judge is to hear the case in Alexandria, Virginia, beginning 16 September.

Lewis's situation has caught the attention of Representative David McIntosh (R-IN), who chairs a House Government Reform subcommittee looking into "the role of politics in actions at EPA," says staffer Larisa Dobriansky. "We are quite disturbed" by Lewis's case, "and we intend to investigate," she says.

Meanwhile, Pombo has completed a discussion draft of his bill. An aide says the proposal, which may be introduced this fall, would require "legitimate peer review" of all proposed rules involving science before agencies publish them in the *Federal Register*.

U.K. Trust to Boost Irish Biomedical Research

Ireland's ailing biomedical research effort got a major shot in the arm last week as the London-based Wellcome Trust, the world's richest biomedical charity, announced plans to award grants in Ireland totaling \$1.58 million per year over the next 3 years. The new grants will be administered by Ireland's Health Research Board (HRB) and will be roughly matched by the Irish government. As a result, the HRB's research spending will leap 70% to about \$7.4 million per year.

This is good news for Irish researchers, whose nation's per capita spending on R&D is among the lowest in the industrialized world. And despite the Irish government's promises over the past 2 years to bolster science funding, little extra cash has materialized until now. Indeed, the Wellcome Trust's generosity is apparently intended in part to help pry open Irish coffers. "There is an element of the carrot and the stick here," says HRB chief executive Vivian O'Gorman. "They want us to do our part to increase the budget."

Likewise, trust director Bridget Ogilvie told reporters that future Irish funding would "take account of... the matching fund agreement and the level and nature of the government's support for scientific research in Ireland."

Striking a Balance at NIST

President Clinton's choice of a career civil servant to lead the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) could mean a lower profile for an agency once embroiled in ideological battles over technology policy.

Clinton's nominee to head NIST, announced last week, is Ray Kammer, 50, NIST's deputy director for 14 years. Kammer, with a bachelor's degree in English, would be the first nonscientist to lead the \$600 million agency, which operates both in-house labs and the controversial Advanced Technology Program (ATP) of grants to industry-led consortia. He would succeed Arati Prabhakar, who went on maternity leave in January before taking a job with industry.



Kammer

The ATP grants program has been a lightning rod for Republicans who oppose any type of federal industrial policy, but now it seems to have weathered the political storm. Congress is poised to approve a 1998 budget near last year's level of \$225 million without the rancor that characterized past budget fights.

And Kammer is the right man to keep both ATP and NIST out of the limelight, according to observers. "He knows the agency and he knows the politics," says one Republican aide who has followed technology issues closely. "He has no downside." Adds a former Democratic staffer, "He's been a broker on ATP and other issues, and he's scrupulously objective."