edited by JOCELYN KAISER

SOLECTRIA CORP.

Revving up? Cimate plan might include more funds for projects like this electric car.

Climate Plan R&D: A Lot of Hot Air?

While scientists and engineers may have cheered the $5 billion in tax cuts and R&D mentioned last week in President Clinton's proposal to cut greenhouse gas emissions, experts are skeptical that the plan will actually boost energy research spending.

For one, the Administration has not spelled out the breakdown between tax breaks and federal research. A White House staffer says only that the extra R&D may involve "many agencies" and that priorities will be guided by a recent report from the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), which recommended that federal energy R&D grow by more than $1 billion a year by 2003 (*Science*, 10 October, p. 217). However, many observers predict that the bulk of the funds—$5 billion over 5 years—will go to tax breaks. So R&D growth "could turn out to be substantially less" than what PCAST advised, says panelist Daniel Lashof of the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C.

Also threatening to undermine a beefier energy R&D program is the balanced budget deal, which would force spending cuts elsewhere. "Can we afford it and do we agree with the priorities?" asks a congressional staffer. An answer to that question will have to wait until after February, when the Administration presents its 1998 budget request.

Academy Makes Fast Track Bid to Congress

Among the last-minute items on Congress's agenda as it scrambles to recess next month is a request by the National Academy of Sciences for legislation exempting the NAS from federal openness rules. While passage this year is a long shot, academy officials are eager for the exemption to avoid lawsuits that could be filed before Congress can return to the topic in January.

An animal rights group has argued successfully in court that the academy should abide by Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) rules for open deliberations; the group says this would result in more balanced reports. But the academy says FACA would compromise its independence. NAS Executive Officer William Colglazier has been discussing an exemption amid fading hopes that the Supreme Court will take up its case.

The legislation could be a free-standing bill or a rider attached to a bill, says a congressional staffer. But Congress is set to adjourn in November, and any bill would have to be noncontroversial to slide through the House and Senate, the staffer says. To smooth the way, he adds, the academy has agreed to "some sort of sunshine procedures" that would allow more public access to its activities while ensuring it maintains control over choosing committee members and writing reports. Eric Glitzenstein, an attorney for the group suing the NAS, agrees that a compromise is possible, but suggests the issues be aired at hearings before a law is passed.

Congress to Reexamine Biomedical Priorities

The contentious topic of how to allocate funding among competing disease research projects seems likely to get renewed scrutiny on Capitol Hill in 1998. The House Speaker is creating a panel to examine priorities in the National Institutes of Health's (NIH's) $13 billion budget, and the Senate is backing a similar review by the Institute of Medicine (IOM).

Committees in both the House and Senate held hearings earlier this year on how the NIH allocates funds to specific disease areas (*Science*, 18 April, p. 334). Among the questions they considered: Does AIDS research get a disproportionate share of funds, and should diabetes and Parkinson's disease get more?

Now, lawmakers are preparing to revisit the subject. Last week, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) revealed that he is creating a working group to examine "how the NIH sets priorities," according to the newsletter *Washington Fax*. The Senate, meanwhile, has approved a clause in the NIH 1998 appropriations bill that calls for a "comprehensive" $300,000 IOM study on the "policies and process" NIH uses to allocate funds.

The formation of Gingrich's review panel, to be headed by Rep. George Nethercutt (R–WA), took many observers by surprise. Some well-briefed congressional staffers told *Science* that they had no clue what the panel would do—but hoped to learn more soon. And Rep. John Porter (R–IL), chair of the subcommittee that drafts NIH's appropriations bill, comments judiciously: "This is a subject that bears a lot of scrutiny, and I'm happy to work with George [Nethercutt] on it."

Porter has resisted earmarking funds for specific diseases, but notes that some members believe that some "diseases that affect larger populations … are not receiving sufficient priority in NIH's funding." Nethercutt could not be reached for comment.

Smoldering Battle Over Saccharin Heats Up

After more than 2 decades under suspicion as a human carcinogen, saccharin—one of the most controversial food additives ever—may soon be exonerated by the federal government. But some prominent scientists oppose the move, arguing that the artificial sweetener is still potentially dangerous.

Saccharin came under scrutiny in the 1970s when studies found it caused bladder cancer in male rats fed piles of sodium saccharin. Other animal tests and human population studies, however, had negative or equivocal findings. The debate became so hot that in 1977, Congress ordered the Food and Drug Administration not to ban saccharin. But FDA still requires warnings on food, and the federal Report on Carcinogens lists saccharin as "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen."

This week, an advisory panel of the National Toxicology Program (NTP) was to consider a petition from an industry group, the Calorie Control Council, to remove saccharin from the 1999 carcinogens report. In a draft review recommending delisting, NTP points to new studies suggesting that male rats fed saccharin develop bladder tumors only under "rat-specific" urinary conditions, including high pH and the formation of crystals.

But NTP's arguments are "flawed," claims a 24 October letter from the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. Among the eight signers are epidemiologist Devra Davis of the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C., and pathologist Emmanuel Farber of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, chair of a 1978 National Academy of Sciences panel that found saccharin to be a weak carcinogen. The letter notes, for example, that other cancers increased in some rodent studies; and certain subgroups of people using artificial sweeteners did appear to have a bladder cancer risk. "My concern is children," says Farber, because they could consume "lots of saccharin" in soft drinks. "That makes me nervous."

They aren't the only researchers with doubts: The votes on two NTP scientific committees that recommended delisting were not unanimous. The NTP is expected to send a final recommendation to the Health and Human Services secretary next year.