INDIRECT COSTS

Universities Balk at OMB Funding Rules

A smoldering dispute between major research universities and the U.S. government over the cost of doing research has flared up once again. The spark is a new set of rules, proposed by the White House, that would limit subsidies for research facilities. University lobbyists say the limits could hurt efforts to issue private construction bonds for new labs, and researchers worry that they could also increase the cost of animal research.

The proposed regulation is part of an arcane but far-reaching document known as Circular A-21, drafted by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Its aim is to control the $3 billion in "indirect" or infrastructure costs paid by the federal government each year to educational institutions as overhead on research grants. In September, OMB proposed changes to A-21 and gave the universities until 10 November to comment on them.

The strongest protest so far comes from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), which represents 125 U.S. medical schools and 86 professional societies. AAMC President Jordan Cohen sent a sharply worded critique to the White House on 28 October, urging that the proposals be "scrapped." AAMC is particularly upset by what it views as an attempt to discourage the construction of expensive facilities. OMB's proposed rules would require universities to submit detailed justification if they seek reimbursement for buildings costing more than $10 million and if the construction costs are more than 125% of the median rate for gross square footage in their geographic region, as determined by a survey conducted by the National Science Foundation.

Cohen's four-page letter says this demand for extra data assumes that universities are not now behaving reasonably—an assumption he finds outrageous. "Nowhere in the notice does OMB offer any evidence that educational institutions ... have constructed any facility that is unreasonably costed," writes Cohen. "We believe the OMB is proposing to create a burdensome system to solve a nonexistent problem." Cohen says cutting-edge science cannot be done in "average" facilities, adding that AAMC is "astonished ... that the proposal is presented without any credible, data-driven analysis modeling the impact of the new proposal on universities and schools of medicine."

Other groups representing research institutions—including the Association of American Universities and the Council on Governmental Relations (COGR)—are planning to submit letters as well. COGR's executive director, Milton Goldberg, predicts that their comments will be just as tough as AAMC's, and he confirms that some universities worry that the new rules could make it harder to raise money through bonds by undermining confidence in the universities' ability to recoup the cost of construction through federal payments.

A different complaint comes from the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), which represents researchers rather than administrators. According to FASEB's public affairs officer, Howard Garrison, the group is primarily concerned about a new accounting rule for animal facilities. OMB has proposed treating animal centers as "specialized facilities," which means that their costs would have to be paid directly from the grants of researchers who use the facilities and not charged as overhead across the entire university. Linda Cork, chair of comparative medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine, has estimated that this change could more than double the cost of animal studies. (See Policy Forum, *Science*, 2 May, p. 758.)

After the public comment period ends next week, OMB will decide whether to revise its A-21 proposal or proceed immediately with implementation. If it chooses the second course, the dissent may soon grow louder.

–Eliot Marshall

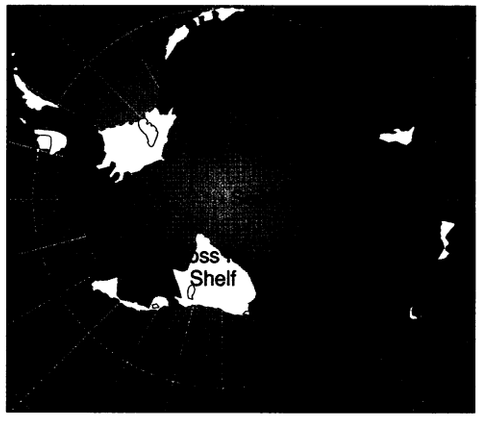
GEOLOGY

Storm Aborts Antarctic Drilling Project

A fierce storm off the Antarctic coast has forced scientists to abandon work on an eagerly awaited drilling project weeks earlier than they had planned. They now must wait at least another year for long-sought data on key geologic events that shaped the frozen continent. "It's real sad that they had to quit so early," says Rosemary Askin, a project scientist at Ohio State University in Columbus. But there was some good news: Before they aborted the drilling, researchers retrieved sediment from a period never before sampled in the region.

For years geologists have searched for Antarctic sediment dating from 30 million to 145 million years ago, a time during which the vast Antarctic ice sheet is thought to have formed and the Transantarctic Mountains pushed up. These layers may hold clues to the forces that transformed a lush landscape teeming with dinosaurs and other lifeforms into an icy wasteland. And the information might yield insights into how shifts in today's climate might alter the environment—particularly how warming might melt Antarctic ice and raise global sea levels.

Finding accessible sediment from that period has been no easy task, because 95% of Antarctica's landmass is covered by a kilometers-thick ice sheet. In the 1980s, however, geologists bouncing sound waves off submerged sediment about 20 kilometers off



Icebreaker. A severe spring storm has forced an end to drilling off Cape Roberts.

Antarctica's Cape Roberts pinpointed ancient strata 150 to 500 meters beneath the surface of the southwest corner of the Ross Sea. The sediments, 1500 meters thick, are estimated to span a period ranging from 30 million to 100 million years ago.

Jumping to exploit the find, several dozen researchers from Australia, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States set out to build a special drilling platform. They couldn't use a drill ship because sea ice extends too far into the austral summer to make that an option, and conditions in the winter are too harsh for any drilling operations. So project engineers designed a rig that could be rolled onto a 1.5-meter ice sheet in early September and be used until the ice starts to break up, which usually occurs in late November.

The platform was set to debut last year. However, late-winter storms in 1996 forced researchers to postpone the project. This year, drilling had been under way for just 9 days when an unseasonable storm bore down on the Ross Sea on 22 October. The 2-day storm, says project chief scientist Peter Barrett of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, was "more severe than any [on record] from this time of year." Abetted by 3 weeks of temperatures that were about 10 degrees Celsius warmer than usual, the storm swells ravaged the outer fringe of the weakened sea ice and sent fissures snaking to within a kilometer of the rig. If the storm had passed just 50 to 100 kilometers further east, "there is a good chance the sea ice