

NIH to End Junior Grant Category

A plan to do away with entry-level grants for biomedical research won the support of the National Institutes of Health's top brass at a meeting on 13 November, according to NIH Deputy Director Wendy Baldwin. NIH officials had been considering abolishing the low-budget R29 grant category since last summer. While the grant is considered easier for young investigators to obtain than the standard R01, it's also relatively meager, providing a maximum of \$350,000 over 5 years (*Science*, 7 November, p. 1006).

The NIH institute directors agreed to stop accepting R29 applications after June 1998, Baldwin says. And "the big thing," she claims, is that "we are committed to maintaining the same numbers" of new investigators as in the past. Funding these new applicants at the higher R01 funding level may cost NIH an extra \$60 million a year.

Not everyone is enthusiastic, however. Lynn Morrison of the American Federation for Medical Research is concerned that the change may cut out some young researchers who depend on R29s for survival. "There are plenty of R29 awardees who would rather be in second class than completely out of research," she says.



Limited use. CDC staffers ready to survey the nation's health. DNA from volunteers may be studied under strict conditions.

Archive Available for Genetic Studies

For nearly 2 years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been trying to find an ethically acceptable way to permit genetic studies on a priceless resource—thousands of DNA samples collected a few years ago from a broad sample of the U.S. public. Now CDC staffers think they have figured out how scientists can study these samples without compromising the donors' anonymity.

The samples come from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, which gathers huge amounts of clinical data from volunteers on everything from hypertension to bone density for population health studies. NHANES-III, from 1988 to 1994, also collected blood from 17,000 donors. Such cell archives could be a gold mine for studying genetic diseases (*Science*, 26 January 1996, p. 440). But there's

a problem: Donors did not give consent to have their DNA used in genetic research, and the clinical information could in theory be used to link the results of a DNA analysis to an individual.

But staffers at CDC's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in Hyattsville, Maryland, which oversees NHANES-III, now think they have found a way to make such linking practically impossible, and an internal ethics panel recently approved the scheme. Researchers who request NHANES-III DNA samples will be given very limited clinical data and deliberately vague demographic information about donors (age only within 10 years, race only if scientifically justified). And they will receive only DNA—not cells, which would be needed to duplicate the DNA—and must agree to return unused material to NCHS.

NCHS director Ed Sondik says he recognizes that some researchers may think these and other restrictions go too far. But, he says, "we must err on the side of caution." An NCHS technical panel, a staffer says, may be ready to approve research proposals as soon as next month.

Hopes Dim for Revised Species Law

This fall may have been the high-water mark for reworking the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The 24-year-old law to protect biodiversity has won repeated short-term extensions since it expired 5 years ago. But this year reformers thought that they had enough votes to prevail in the Senate, which for years had failed to take any action. However, a 15-to-3 victory in committee did not carry over to a floor vote for S. 1180 before Congress recessed last week.

The bill's chief backer, Senator Dirk Kempthorne (R-ID), and a bipartisan Senate team sought to use science to reconcile the desires of property owners to shrink the law's scope with those of environmentalists, who wanted to expand its reach. The bill directed the National Academy of Sciences to create a pool of referees for peer-reviewing decisions to list and delist species, and it mandated scientific benchmarks for assessing recovery. The bill also codified Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt's programs to encourage landowners to conserve habitat (*Science*, 13 June, pp. 1636 and 1662).

"The emphasis on science was welcome," says Dee Boersma, president of the Society for Conservation Biology, although she adds that it "layered on too much process"—the reason some environmental groups opposed the bill. But Babbitt endorsed it, as did many industry groups. Nevertheless, the bill never reached a Senate vote, held up by campaign-finance reform battles.

Hill staffers say it's uncertain whether S. 1180 will be resurrected in the spring. Property-rights opposition may grow, while environmentalists are likely to back a different bill in the House. Worse, Kempthorne's departure next spring to run for Idaho governor leaves the drive without a clear leader in the Senate. Thus the ESA may limp along on 1-year extensions indefinitely.

President to Ink Cliffhanger NAS Bill

A 10-month saga that has preoccupied the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) is expected to end shortly when President Clinton signs a bill exempting the academy from federal rules concerning advisory panels. The academy is "delighted" with the pending law, which will protect the academy's independence, says NAS President Bruce Alberts. The academy also bowed to critics by promising to provide the public with more information on its work (*Science*, 14 November, p. 1219).

The situation looked grim for the academy after the Supreme Court last month let stand a lower court's decision in January that would have made the NAS subject to the 1972 Federal Advisory Committee Act. And the hastily crafted congressional exemption nearly ran afoul of personal politics. Senate Commerce Committee Chair John McCain (R-AZ) initially objected, in part because of con-

cerns raised by Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), chair of the House Science Committee. "I didn't sign off on" the bill before it passed in the House on 10 November, Sensenbrenner complains, explaining that he favored a stricter version: "This bill has a bunch of loopholes." But one lawmaker says those concerns were over turf, not substance: "He was just piqued because he wasn't involved." Sources say Sensenbrenner's staff proposed having the Senate wait until next year to act on the bill. That could have sparked a financial crisis, NAS officials say, because agencies might have shied away from requesting studies because of fear of legal attack.

The academy's arguments ultimately won out. McCain and another senator shelved their objections hours before the Senate adjourned on 13 November, and the bill was passed.