SCIENCESCOPE

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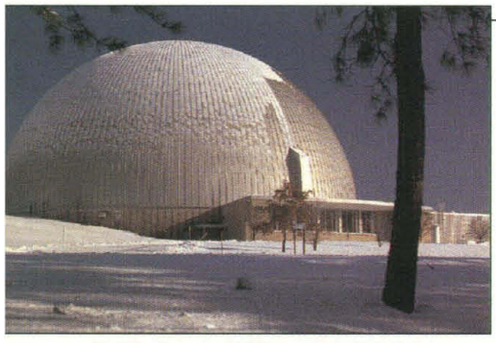

BROOKHAVEN NATIONAL LAB

Political pawn. DOE has put off decision on reopening Brookhaven's high-flux reactor.

No Votes From Research Reactor?

An ancient political maxim is to postpone as long as possible a controversial decision—at least until after the next election. That appears to be what's behind Department of Energy (DOE) Secretary Federico Peña's announcement last week to delay a decision on whether to reopen a shuttered nuclear reactor at Brookhaven National Lab in Upton, New York, until late 1998. DOE says it wants to wait for results from an environmental impact study, but other government and industry officials claim the real reason is next year's congressional elections.

The lab's High-Flux Beam Reactor (HFBR), a neutron source used for materials research, has remained closed for a year due to a tritium leak that has outraged local Long Island residents. Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R–NY) and Representative Michael Forbes (R–NY) oppose a restart, and both are up for reelection next November. "Peña does not want to give them this issue to run on," says one university manager. Reactor advocates hope DOE will have a better shot at reopening the facility once the elections are over.

DOE officials, meanwhile, are carefully distancing themselves from a 22 November report from the department's basic energy advisory committee that backs a prompt HFBR restart, along with a $150 million upgrade. The study argues that the reactor's continued closure hurts the research community. But in a 10 December statement, DOE energy research chief Martha Krebs cautioned that the report "should not be considered reflective of the department's thinking."

Clinton Ducks Future R&D Spending Issue

Science funding advocates hoping for big things from a policy speech by President Bill Clinton this week had to be satisfied with a few stale crumbs. In a brief 16 December speech during the annual awards of the Medals of Science and Technology at the White House, Clinton praised science innovations as the engine behind what he calls "the new economy" of growth and spelled out $94 million in new technology efforts. But he stopped short of announcing any major new initiatives and gave few clues to his 1999 R&D budget request.

Clinton announced eight new competitions in the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program, from an $82 million pot, for efforts that could create computer displays the size and weight of this magazine page, improve drugs, and develop radio-transmitting cards to locate lost children. He also said $14 million in Defense Department funding would go to universities and private companies to try to develop a supercomputer the size of today's computer chips.

The speech was being watched closely by R&D advocates who back a Senate bill that calls for doubling civilian R&D spending over the next decade, to $68 billion (*Science*, 31 October, p. 796). Clinton said his Administration has supported R&D funding increases 5 years in a row, but he did not discuss future growth. White House officials have criticized the Senate measure as unrealistic, and Science Adviser Jack Gibbons said pointedly during the award ceremony that the president has maintained a strategy of "fiscal responsibility" along with investment in R&D.

Inventors' Court Victory Worries Universities

In a decision that has struck fear into the hearts of university officials, a California appeals court has ruled in favor of two former University of California (UC) faculty members who claim they were shortchanged $2.3 million in royalties. Universities are concerned that the ruling—which found that UC had improperly relabeled royalties as research funds—could spur companies to cut back on funding for academic research. "It will have a very chilling effect," predicts Karen Hersey, intellectual property counsel for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The suit was filed in 1993 by Jerome Singer and Lawrence Crooks, who were among the inventors of magnetic resonance imaging at two UC campuses in the 1970s. UC had lowered the rate at which Pfizer Medical Systems, a firm that licensed the technology, paid royalties, while negotiating much larger "research fees" from the company. The duo claimed the university had shifted the money to keep more for itself, since UC's policy says 50% of royalties must go to the employee-inventor. Last year a jury sided with Singer and Crooks, but the judge overruled the decision, arguing that UC's negotiations for royalties and for research funding were unrelated. The professors appealed, and the 26 November ruling reinstated the award.

Some university officials worry that other inventors might follow Singer and Crooks's lead and sue for back royalties. Even more troubling, says Terry Feuerborn of UC's Office of Technology Transfer, the case could severely complicate already delicate negotiations with firms for research funds. "The university has to be able to … assure the corporate sponsor that the money will go for research and not royalties," says Gerald Dodson, UC's attorney in the case. Dodson planned to file an appeal with the state supreme court this week.

Full Court Press to Thwart Gallium Grab

Hoping to save a beleaguered astrophysics facility, top Russian scientists were expected to meet privately this week with Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to discuss the Russian government's plans to sell off 60 tons of gallium in a solar neutrino observatory in the Caucasus mountains. The Russian scientists planned to give the prime minister a letter from top U.S. scientists supporting their cause.

Since the mid-1980s, the Soviet-American Gallium Experiment (SAGE) and a second facility have detected half as many low-energy neutrinos from the sun as predicted, upsetting solar models. A 12 December letter spearheaded by John Bahcall of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, signed by 15 U.S. colleagues—including 12 Nobel laureates—calls SAGE "one of the most successful research efforts in the past decade." Earlier this fall, thieves failed in an attempt to steal the ultrapure gallium at the heart of the $60 million facility (*Science*, 14 November, p. 1220). Now the government plans to transfer the gallium to one of its energy ministries, which wants to sell it.

SAGE's destruction "would mean the loss of a valuable world resource for … fundamental physics," says the U.S. letter. It asks Chernomyrdin to "reserve all the SAGE gallium for basic science." Bahcall organized a similar letter 3 years ago that helped persuade Russia to keep the facility operating despite the nearby war in Chechnya. He's hoping to work similar magic again.

The U.S. letter follows a similar missive from 12 prominent Russian physicists to Chernomyrdin last month. "They might as well start selling off precious stones from the Cap of Monomach," the scientists write, referring to a lavish crown worn by Peter the Great. As *Science* went to press, however, it was hard to predict whether the Russian government would allow sale of the gallium—or Peter's crown, for that matter.