



Research revival? Kremlin moves to boost science funds.

Yeltsin Plan Would Increase R&D

Russian President Boris Yeltsin's Cabinet last week approved a plan to restructure the country's research effort, and declared an ambitious goal of boosting science spending to 4% of the federal budget. Researchers are cautiously optimistic that the measures will be implemented.

Russian science has been in dire straits for several years because of the country's faltering economy. A reform plan, released last October by Science Minister Vladimir Fortov, aims to restructure the Russian Academy of Sciences, encourage technology transfer from academic labs to industry, and create regional research information centers (*Science*, 14 November 1997, p. 1220). It also would free young researchers from the obligatory 2-year military service.

CHRISTOPHER MORRIS/PI

Although the plan rejects the idea of closing moribund institutes and firing staff, it does find it "reasonable" to merge institutes that carry out similar research and require expensive equipment. And it favors "selective support" of priority research areas, to be defined later.

The Cabinet also set the target level of science funding at 4% of the budget starting next year—about one-third more than current levels—and pledged to further ratchet up R&D spending until it rivals that of Western countries. Researchers, however, say they have heard this song before. "The budget has changed on paper," says physicist Andrey Gonchar. "But where will they get the money from?"

The science ministry now plans to take steps to implement the reform plan. "It's only now that the concept is approved that the real work begins," Fortov says.

NSF Defends Minority Set-Aside

Government lawyers have attacked the scientific capabilities of a white graduate student who has sued the National Science Foundation (NSF) for reserving some of its fellowships for minority students. The arguments come in response to a complaint filed last month (*Science*, 2 January, p. 22) by Travis Kidd, a Clemson Uni-

versity math graduate student, whose application for the prestigious graduate fellowship was rejected last spring.

Kidd alleges that the set-aside is unconstitutional and that NSF should stop processing applications for this year's awards until racial criteria are removed. NSF awards some 1000 fellowships each year, 150 of which are reserved for blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, and Alaska natives. The 3-year fellowships go to first-year graduate students in any field that NSF funds.

In a motion filed 7 January, the government argues that Kidd cannot bring the suit because he "would not have come close to receiving an NSF fellowship even if all were awarded on an unrestricted basis." His application, they say, ranked in the bottom 40% of those submitted. They also say the program upholds a congressional mandate to increase the number of minorities in science and that such a goal "is in the public interest." Kidd's lawyer, Gregory Brown, did not return phone calls.

A federal judge in Alexandria, Virginia, was slated to hear arguments today by the plaintiff to stop the program immediately, and by the government to throw out the suit. If both options are rejected, the next step would be a trial.

Labour Flatlines U.K. Science Spending

When the Labour Party won last May's general election, it pledged to stick to the tough spending plans of its Tory predecessor—including a flat budget for science spending. Last week, the British government showed that it is true to its word. Funding for the \$2.1 billion science budget will rise only \$13 million for 1998, which is a decrease of \$48 million if one takes into account inflation.

Engineering and Physical Sciences research fares the worst, with a cut of \$5.4 million, while natural environment research fares best, with a \$10 million boost to its \$265 million budget.

The announcement disappointed researchers. "This is not what we expect from a government whose prime minister has committed to reinvigorating the science base," says physicist John Mulvey, spokesperson for the lobbying group Save British Science. Future spending will be determined by the results of a major review of spending across all departments, due to be completed by the summer. "The planned reduction in the science budgets must be ended," he adds.

University researchers did have some good news. The results of the second annual round of a scheme to fund equipment through partnerships between industry and government reveal \$72 million from the private sector, matched by \$55 million from the government. Among the biggest winners was Cambridge University physicist Stephen Hawking, with \$2 million for his studies on the origin of the universe. "This amounts to a significant boost to the promotion of new opportunities for strategic collaboration in areas in which British science is particularly strong," says Tessa Blackstone, U.K. education minister. Mulvey welcomes the money but says there was still "great concern as to how to deal with the backlog in equipment for universities."

NIH's High-Profile New Advocate

A celebrity journalist is the latest champion of biomedical research. Morton Kondracke has organized a group called NIH² to raise \$2 million to wage a 2-year campaign on behalf of research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The detailed strategy is being developed by the public relations firm Fleishman and Hillard in Washington, D.C., with advice from other NIH² members.

"We would like to get Congress to pass a bill to put NIH on track to double over a 5-year period," says Kondracke, a columnist, television commentator, and editor for a daily paper that covers Congress. With political writer Fred Barnes, he is also part-owner of a company that produced a show funded by the Corpora-

tion for Public Broadcasting on biomedical research politics.



Kondracke

Asked whether he felt any discomfort at being both a journalist covering Congress and a lobbyist for congressional legislation, Kondracke said: "No ... I'm not getting paid for this. I'm allowed to have a civic life too, and I disclose what I do." He explains that his wife has Parkinson's disease, and that as a private citizen he has been pushing for more Parkinson's research.

Other biomedical research advocates appear to be pleased about NIH². David Moore, executive secretary of the influential Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding, says: "Anybody who wants to help us, we welcome with open arms."