

Congress Smiles on Ag Research

It may have been absent in the president's plan for boosting R&D, but now agricultural science is getting some attention. A House-Senate conference last week approved a bill that would more than double the competitive grants budget of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The Agricultural Research Bill would funnel \$600 million over the next 5 years into a new program to operate independently of the USDA's \$97-million-a-year National Research Initiative (NRI) (*Science*, 9 January, p. 173). While the NRI funds mainly basic research, the new program would aim to boost agricultural productivity by supporting a mix of basic and applied studies in areas such as food safety, nutrition, biotech, and plant and animal genomic research. "This is really one of the most important things for agricultural research in the last 15 or 20 years," says Lou Sherman, chair of biological sciences at Purdue University and spokesperson for the American Society of Plant Physiologists.

The plan for the new fund, sponsored by Senate Agriculture Committee chair Richard Lugar (R-IN), met resistance last fall in the House, partly because it would be paid for with leftover food stamp money that Democrats wanted injected back into welfare programs. Conferees compromised by also allocating \$1.1 billion in leftover cash for food stamps for immigrants and crop



Hog heaven. New funds may raise animal and crop productivity.

insurance, a Lugar spokesperson says. The bill also jacks up from \$67 million to \$150 million the portion of USDA's 5-year Fund for Rural America that will go to research in such areas as alternative fuels and the handling of animal waste.

The Administration supports the measure, but staffers say it may still run into opposition when both houses vote on it, expected to be as soon as this week. Says Sherman, "I wouldn't bet the farm yet."

Agglomerating Statistics

Support is growing for a measure to merge the federal government's three largest statistics agencies: the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and the Commerce Department's Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Last fall, a bipartisan group introduced a Senate bill (S. 1404) that would create a com-

mission to recommend how to combine the three giants as one entity. At a subcommittee hearing last week, witnesses lauded the idea. It would be "a big step forward for statistics," said Charles Waite, a former top Census official. A "damn good idea," agrees Ed Spar, executive director of the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics.

Merging the three agencies, say boosters, would eliminate redundancies, such as the near-duplicate lists of businesses kept by different bureaus. The lists form a starting point for data collection but cost millions to maintain. Statisticians also hope that the prestige of a single multifaceted agency will attract the next generation of statisticians, many of whom are now being drawn to the more lucrative private sector.

But the feelings aren't unanimous: "People always talk about the [redundant] business lists," says BLS commissioner Katherine Abraham, but "I've yet to hear another" example of the benefits of a merger. The agencies' real problems, she insists—such as how to calculate the Consumer Price Index—won't be solved by sticking everyone under the same roof. Increased data sharing among the agencies—as the bill also proposes—might accomplish the same goals without the disruption of a merger, she adds. Nevertheless, experts say the odds of a Senate bill passing are high, and a companion House bill is now in the works.

Another Kick for Japan's Economy

Japan's scientific community may get a shot in the arm as part of the country's latest effort to stimulate its sluggish economy. The government is expected to unveil later this month a plan to spend 16 trillion yen (\$123 billion) in the fiscal year starting 1 April on public works, including "the infrastructure for the promotion of science and technology." The stimulus package is the largest of a half-dozen major pump-priming packages put together since Japan's economic growth slowed to a crawl in the early 1990s.

In the R&D sector, spending measures have refurbished university labs, bought supercomputers, and sped up the completion of major facilities such as the Super Photon Ring 8-giga-electron volt synchrotron, which came on line a year early last fall. Any new money would be in addition to the 3 trillion yen (\$23.3 billion), not counting staff salaries, budgeted for R&D this year. The government is still finalizing details of the latest package, but some researchers already have their hopes up. Sakue Yamada, a director at the High-Energy Accelerator Research Organization (KEK) in Tsukuba, says his institute is hoping for a new building so researchers from the former Institute for Nuclear Studies of the University of Tokyo, which was merged into KEK last year, can move to KEK's campus.

A spokesperson for the Liberal Democratic Party, part of the coalition that is putting together the stimulus package, says the plan is to move a supplementary budget bill through the Diet in time for Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's trip to Birmingham, U.K., for the annual summit of the eight major industrialized countries in mid-May. The package is at least partly intended to deflect criticism from the U.S. and Europe that Japan isn't doing enough to stimulate its economy.

New World View at MacArthur Foundation



Wallerstein

After giving its international grants programs a post-Cold War makeover, the MacArthur Foundation this week announced the appointment of a new vice president to run its overseas operations: political scientist Mitchel Wallerstein.

The foundation this year merged its three international programs, on peace, world population, and the environment, into a single Program on Global Security and Sustainability that will hand out \$56 million in grants in 1998—about

a third of the foundation's budget. The new approach "will emphasize crosscutting themes like human rights and U.S. roles and responsibilities," says Wallerstein, who has directed climate and biodiversity studies at the National Research Council and has overseen U.S. counterproliferation policy at the Defense Department.

The MacArthur economy is booming these days—real estate sell-offs combined with a bull stock market have driven its endowment from \$3.1 billion to \$4 billion and raised its annual budget from \$240 million to \$255 million over the past 2 years.