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Sea change ahead? Scientists want to expand U.S.-Cuba ties, such as this 1995 CMC-led trip.

U.S. and Cuba Asked to Ease Restrictions

You could pick easier countries than Cuba to try to set up joint studies or invite a colleague to a meeting in the United States, given the capricious rules governing scientific travel between the United States and Cuba. But amid signs of thawing relations between the two countries, scientists are making a full-court press to persuade U.S. officials to ease restrictions on scientific exchanges.

In a report issued last week, AAAS (which publishes *Science*) cites more than 30 instances in which Cuban scientists were denied permission from either U.S. or Cuban authorities to attend meetings or work in a lab in the United States, or else received a U.S. visa too late to attend. U.S. scientists who want to do research in Cuba don't have it easy, either, AAAS says: Since 1994, they have had to navigate an unpredictable process for getting a license from the Treasury Department to spend money for business travel in Cuba (*Science*, 23 September 1994, p. 1803).

The report calls on U.S. and Cuban authorities to lift license requirements for scientists. As a first step, the report says, the governments should establish appeals processes for visa and license denials, and scientific groups should help evaluate applications. Past experience suggests that "if the

U.S. frees up, then Cuba frees up" restrictions on scientific travel, says AAAS's Audrey Chapman. But State Department official Michael Ranneberger says no change in licensing policy is being discussed. "The vast majority" of licenses and visas are approved, he notes.

Even if the governments refuse to budge, U.S. scientists shouldn't be too discouraged, says Michael Smith of the Center for Marine Conservation (CMC) in Washington, D.C. By "doing our homework" on how to craft applications, Smith says, he's arranged dozens of exchanges since 1994. Cuba-U.S. collaborations "can flourish," he says. AAAS has asked the U.S. State and Treasury departments to respond to its report by 15 April.

Lane, Colwell Prepare for Senate Exam

President Bill Clinton must make decisions, meet world leaders, and fence with the press without guidance from a science adviser—at least briefly—following Jack Gibbons's departure last week after 5 years on the job. The White

House is now waiting for the FBI to finish checking his successor, National Science Foundation director Neal Lane.

The Senate—which must confirm Lane in the job—is on recess until 20 April. But once the nomination reaches the Commerce Committee, there should be little delay in approving Lane quickly, say Administration officials. Staff for Senator John McCain (R-AZ), who chairs that panel, "have promised to move expeditiously," says one. That means Lane could move into his new digs next to the White House in early May. Although no one will serve as an interim science adviser, Kerri-Ann Jones, associate director for national security and international affairs, is taking over as acting director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Approval of Lane's successor, meanwhile, is moving faster. Microbiologist Rita Colwell's nomination to succeed Lane went to the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee on 2 April and is also unlikely to generate controversy.

Patent Chief Denies He's Leaving

Rumors of a shake-up at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) have been circulating since February, when President Clinton nominated Philadelphia attorney Q. Todd Dickinson to be PTO deputy commissioner. Reports suggested Dickinson would replace current PTO commissioner Bruce Lehman. But a spokesperson says it is "not true" that Lehman is on the way out. And a high-level PTO staffer adds that all signs are that Lehman plans to stay put, having recently told the staff that "I will leave when I want to leave."

However, turmoil in the upper ranks—including reports of clashes between Lehman and his deputies—prompted Lehman to write in a recent internal PTO newsletter that "the only [rumor] that hasn't circulated ... is that I've been abducted by aliens." His advice: "Don't believe everything you read or hear." Dickinson, meanwhile, has joined PTO as a consultant and awaits congressional review of his nomination.

Russia's Science Cities Face Squeeze

Once elite research bastions, the 70-odd scientific towns scattered throughout Russia now struggle to sustain the scientists who have stayed to eke out a living. But a bill in the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, could make that struggle harder: It would end an exemption for the scientific towns from paying property and land taxes.

After World War II, open towns like Siberia's Akademgorodok and closed weapons cities like Arzamas-16 near the Volga River sprang up, skimming the cream of the Soviet scientific establishment. They provided access to housing and consumer goods unavailable to most people and, for Jews and other minorities, the chance to work outside politically oppressive Moscow (*Science*, 15 December 1995, p. 1753). But over the last decade, the towns have lost nearly all their perks and, because many are isolated, have struggled to attract new businesses. To help their plight, the Supreme Soviet in 1992 passed a law exempting them from paying taxes on buildings



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Taxing work. Bill could hurt cities such as Arzamas-16 and its laser lab.

and associated lands.

A new tax bill would eliminate these advantages—although experts sharply differ on the ramifications. German Zagaynov, head of the National Association of State Scientific Centres in Moscow, says the annual real estate tax bill for each institute would rival its yearly budget. Not true, counters science ministry official Yuri Lebedev, who calls Za-

gaynov's fears "greatly exaggerated." The Russian constitution, he says, sets the property tax for a research institution at 0.1% of its state-assessed value. Most institutes in research towns should be able to foot that bill without a problem, he predicts.

There's still a chance to work out a compromise before the legislation is voted on, perhaps as early as next week, says Vladimir Lapin, vice president of the Union of Research Towns. His association and Zagaynov's are each preparing proposals for modifications to the tax code. Both declined to go into detail until after the Duma receives their proposals next week.