

# AAAS NEWS & NOTES

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## A Call to End Second Guessing of Scientists

For many scientists, the 90 miles separating Cuba from U.S. shores may as well be 90,000: Because the two nations do not have full diplomatic relations, U.S. and Cuban travel policies have been hindering researchers from both countries from collaborating. An April conference at AAAS brought together representatives from both governments with American scientists to discuss the restrictions and to explain the concerns of the U.S. science community.

Currently, all U.S. travelers to Cuba, including scientists wishing to conduct research, must apply for a license through the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Clara David, a senior licensing officer with OFAC, discussed the regulations for determining approval, which is granted case by case. Of great concern among many in the audience was a policy that requires OFAC officials to assess the worthiness of proposed research, although they do not have scientific qualifications.

In a preliminary report released in conjunction with the conference, AAAS recommended that both countries lift their travel restrictions for scientists. Until that occurs, AAAS called for all decisions on the scientific validity of a project or meeting to be made by a qualified body of scientists.

"We wish that both governments would get out of our way and let us get down to the business of science," said Gillian Gunn Clissold, one of the panelists at the conference. The director of Georgetown University's Caribbean Project, Clissold reported that she has seen many missed opportunities that could have benefited science in both nations. Her department initiates exchanges on a range of topics, from sending U.S. researchers to Cuba to investigate agricultural reform to inviting Cubans here to study the U.S. government decision-making process. Clissold reported that exchanges have been delayed, and sometimes prevented altogether,

because of travel constraints. She added that the U.S. government does not want to admit Cubans who it thinks could spread propaganda during their trip.

The coordinator of the Office of Cuban Affairs at the U.S. State Department, Michael E. Ranneberger, confirmed U.S. concerns about propagandizing: "While each case is decided on its own merits, exceptions [to the current travel ban] are generally not granted if it appears that the proposed travel promotes primarily Cuban Government goals." That policy stems from Presidential Proclamation 5377 of 1985, which denies U.S. visas to officers and employees of the Cuban government and members of the Communist Party of Cuba.

"The 1985 proclamation places Cuban scientists at a particular disadvantage, as almost all scientists in Cuba are government employees," said Elisa Muñoz of AAAS's Science and Human Rights Program. "Although the State Department reports that 82 percent of the Cuban researchers who applied for visas since January 1997 were approved, it has not indicated how many of those were authorized too late for the travel to take place. This is a common complaint among Cuban scientists."

The majority of U.S. researchers received approval for travel licenses, according to Ranneberger; he specified that 600 American scientists traveled to Cuba in 1997, but said he did not know how many were denied permission. Nor is it known how many received their licenses too late. Ranneberger explained that the focus is not on restricting the travel of U.S. citizens, but on restricting financial transactions to maintain economic pressure on the Cuban government to undertake democratic change. He added, "It is the Cuban Government's systematic denial of universally accepted human rights that makes Cuba such a concern to the U.S."

L. Ling-chi Wang, chair of the ethnic studies department at the

A Public Forum on

Genetically  
Modified  
Organisms  
*Redesigning Food*

### Forum to Examine American Attitudes on Genetically Altered Food

On 8 May, biotechnology industry leaders, policy-makers, scientists, and consumer group representatives will discuss safety issues and public receptivity to genetically modified food products at a forum in Washington, D.C. Sponsored by AAAS and the British Embassy, the forum will include an overview of the scientific capabilities for genetically manipulating microbes and crops, as well as industrial and consumer perspectives of genetically modified food products. An afternoon panel will respond to questions on the science of genetically modifying natural food products, the consequences of doing so, public acceptance of this new technology, and the types of policies that should be in place.

Speakers at the forum will include Rita R. Colwell, current president of the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute and nominee for director of the National Science Foundation; Liebe F. Cavalieri, professor of Environmental Science, State University of New York at Purchase; Margaret Mellon, director of Agriculture and Biotechnology, Union of Concerned Scientists; and Rob Horsch, director of Science and Technology, Agracetus Campus, Monsanto.

The opinions presented at the forum will be conveyed to a major European Union public forum in June. The Washington, D.C., forum is free and open to the public. To register, contact Sanyin Siang at 202-326-6792, or send an e-mail to [ssiang@aaas.org](mailto:ssiang@aaas.org). A registration form is also available at <http://www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/sfrrl/gmoforum.htm>

University of California at Berkeley, disagreed with the U.S. government's rationale: "The very same thing we accuse Cuba of doing, we are doing ourselves. The current U.S. policies are in complete contradiction with the principles of academic excellence, free exchange of ideas, and free speech." Wang became active in the travel rights issue when the U.S. government denied visas to 11 out of the 21 Cubans who were invited to speak at a March 1998 "Dialogue with Cuba" conference Wang was chairing. Reported Wang, "The State Department said it would approve lower ranking, less knowledgeable people. I replied, 'You're asking us to condone and pursue mediocrity.'"

Although 21 bipartisan U.S. representatives from California appealed in writing to Secretary of State Madeline Albright, none

of the 11 Cubans was granted a visa. The 3-day conference would have been the first in 39 years to provide a multidisciplinary, in-depth exchange of information between scholars and professionals from both countries.

AAAS has asked the U.S. and Cuban governments to respond to its preliminary report, which includes recommendations to policy-makers in both nations. AAAS is also awaiting statistics on license applications for U.S. scientists seeking to travel to Cuba for research purposes. "We made a formal request through the Freedom of Information Act in July 1996, but still have not received a response," reported Muñoz. "The Association would like to initiate an information clearinghouse to get a bigger picture of the state of U.S.-Cuban scientific collaborations and how we might improve it."