



RESEARCH MANAGEMENT

Richardson Reverses Course On DOE Reorganization

In a switch that surprised supporters and opponents alike, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson last week endorsed a controversial proposal to reorganize the Department of Energy's (DOE's) nuclear weapons program into a semi-independent agency. But it's not yet clear where this change of heart will lead, as lawmakers and DOE officials continue to joust over key details of the plan, which was prompted by allegations of Chinese spying at DOE's weapons laboratories. Although proponents say the changes are needed to prevent future espionage, critics charge they will harm the labs' extensive civilian research programs and allow officials to hide environmental and safety problems from the public.

Last month, in the wake of a White House report that harshly criticized DOE management and security, Republican senators Pete Domenici (NM), Jon Kyl (AZ), and Frank Murkowski (AK) introduced legislation calling for the first major



shake-up of the agency's structure since it was created in 1977 (*Science*, 2 July, p. 18). Their plan would put DOE's sprawling weapons complex, which employs more than 30,000 people at dozens of research and bomb-making facilities around the United States, under the control of a new, largely independent Agency for Nuclear Stewardship led by a high-ranking DOE official. The agency is needed, the sponsors say, to make DOE managers more accountable for protecting secrets.

Richardson repeatedly denounced the plan, charging that it would create "a fiefdom within a fiefdom" and unconstitutionally undermine his authority over nuclear weapons research and production. He also said it would "be a disaster" to place the lab's unclassified science—which includes everything from materials research to climate studies—under the security agency's control,

as it would make it harder for researchers to share information and recruit talented colleagues. DOE's Office of Science, which supports some \$2.7 billion worth of non-defense science a year, would still be able to fund research at the labs, but it would no longer have direct authority over the work. Other critics worried that the agency would be able to block public scrutiny of environmental cleanup and worker safety in the name of national security. "Information that



Forging ahead. Senators Domenici (left) and Murkowski (above) back independent agency.

makes the labs look bad could suddenly become classified," fears Maureen Eldredge of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group. On 8 July, however, Richardson told *The Washington Post* that he was ready to cut a deal with the Senate trio, apparently encouraged by a revised draft of the bill that made it clear he would retain ultimate control over the new agency. The announcement came "as a big surprise—even to some senior DOE folks," says a Senate staffer. But hopes for a quick compromise dimmed a few days later, when a meeting between Senate aides and DOE staff ended with little substantive negotiation. "Staffers were there with sharp pencils ready ... but [DOE officials] wanted to talk more generally," says another aide.

DOE officials expressed concern, for example, about the bill's requirement that the agency have its own security and counterintelligence staff, rather than answer to an agencywide czar. They are also uneasy about plans to insulate the agency from the direct oversight of the department's environment and worker safety officials, who would instead be restricted to making recommen-

dations to the secretary. Such changes "could create a serious bottleneck in decision-making," says a DOE official. A Republican aide, however, says the shift would "put responsibility where it belongs—at the top of the pyramid."

The two sides planned to meet again this week, and "the secretary is hopeful an agreement can be reached," a DOE spokesperson said. But the senators may not let the discussions linger: If there is little sign of progress, aides say they could move to attach their measure—which appears likely to pass the Senate—to national security legislation as early as 16 July.

The reorganization plan faces an uncertain reception in the House, however, where the Science and Commerce committees met on Tuesday, as this issue went to press, to hear from a panel of plan critics, including Eldredge. The joint hearing, an aide says, was designed "to raise some issues the Senate doesn't seem to be focusing on, such as the reorganization's impact on science." Scientists working on cleaning up DOE's many contaminated nuclear weapons sites, for instance, could face a bureaucratic maze if they want to share their results with colleagues outside the new agency, says political scientist Don Kettl of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, a former department adviser who testified at the hearing. "You could reduce DOE's ability to respond [to pollution problems] by building walls that are too high," he says.

Whether such sentiments will convince the House to reformulate the Senate plan won't be known until later this month, when lawmakers from both bodies will meet to hammer out an agreement on the issue. Whatever the outcome, however, a House aide predicts that "DOE's structure is going to change; the only question is how."

—DAVID MALAKOFF

MICROBIOLOGY

Anti-Immune Trick Unveiled in *Salmonella*

The *Salmonella* pathogen is best known as an intestinal bug. But various species also cause severe systemic illnesses such as typhoid fever, and part of the reason people get so sick is that their immune systems cannot quell the infection immediately. Now researchers studying a particular *Salmonella* protein have discovered a surprising new weapon that may help explain the pathogen's

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