

RUSSIAN SCIENCE

Danger to Peer Review Is in Eye of Beholder

MOSCOW—Is peer review in Russian science on the way out? It depends on whom you ask. The heads of two foundations that follow a Western-style peer-review system have very different views on the impact of management changes designed to reduce the foundations' freedom.

"It would be a step back, like from a human being to an ape," contends Yevgeni Semyonov, director-general of the Russian Humanities Sciences Foundation (RHSF), which funds social science. But Mikhail Alfimov, head of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), which funds natural sciences, argues that the new structure won't harm peer review.

Last year, conditions improved slightly for Russian scientists, who for the first time in more than a decade received their regular paychecks each month. But the paltry salaries don't include money to operate their labs. In addition to tapping into Western funds to buy equipment and supplies, scientists also compete for grants from the two Russian foundations. Although the grants aren't for huge sums—about \$3500—they provide young scientists with work and the opportunity to travel to conferences and field sites within Russia.

The foundations are also sterling examples of the positive influence of the West on Russian science. Set up by the government in the early 1990s, the two organizations employ a peer-review system modeled after that of the U.S. National Science Foundation.

Each Russian foundation has a scientific council that arranges for Russian experts to review and make decisions on grant proposals. Separately, each foundation has a directorate that manages its affairs, from administering the grants to interacting with

the government.

Last summer, however, the Putin Administration decided that the foundations enjoyed too much freedom. Although both distribute government funds, they operate independently from the state. By converting each foundation into a state establishment, the government can require its scientific councils to become subordinate to the directorates.

Such an arcane change would wreak major damage on the peer-review system, asserts Semyonov. "The directorate [would] obtain the right to interfere in the decision on the grants distribution," he says. "This

would lead, if not to the complete undoing of the institution of independent evaluation, then at least to its substantial deterioration." Semyonov says that he speaks for many scientists who serve on expert panels or who consult for the RHSF.

Alfimov disagrees. In a recent position paper, he insisted that the change in status is merely a formality. "No one," he wrote, "will encroach on the basic principles of the foundation." Alfimov, who declined to be interviewed for this article, warned Semyonov "not to scare the scientific community."

Alfimov has support from some rank-and-file scientists. Alexei Ryskov, a biologist at the Institute of Gene Biology in Moscow who has served on RFBR review panels, doubts that changing the status of the foundation will corrupt the peer-review system—if only because the grants it hands out are so small. "If we [were speaking] about, say, a \$50,000 grant, that might be different," he says.

Just who's right should be determined in the coming weeks. Alexandr Dondukov, minister of industry, science, and technologies, has granted a reprieve to the humanities foundation, which plans to spend about \$600,000 on grants this year. The natural sciences' body, meanwhile, has dutifully filed the papers for

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the change in status. Now observers are watching to see whether the science council will be able to spend the RFBR's \$3.5 million in grant money this year before it must report to a new boss.

—VLADIMIR POKROVSKY

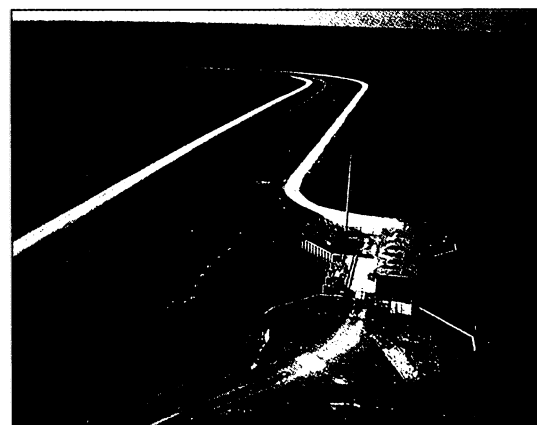
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ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

NRC Panel Pokes Holes In Everglades Scheme

An expert panel that has taken a first cut at reviewing the controversial \$7.8 billion Everglades restoration plan is sounding a note of caution about one of its essential elements. In a report released last week,* the National Research Council (NRC) panel raises concerns about the planned use of wells drilled in southern Florida's Upper Floridan aquifer—a vast, porous layer of limestone—as storage tanks to regulate water levels in the region. "There are significant uncertainties associated with aquifer storage, and you have to answer the questions," says aquifers subcommittee chair Jean Bahr, a hydrogeologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The panel looked at a crucial piece of the



Water world. Everglades plan would shunt water stored in aquifers through canals like these.

Everglades restoration plan—storing water in aquifers. The plan, drawn up by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal and state agencies, would attempt to help ailing wildlife by restoring the natural flows of fresh water that once stretched from Lake Okeechobee south to the Everglades. But

* www.nap.edu/books/0309073391/html