

U.K. Announces Details of National Space Agency

The British government last week announced details of a National Space Agency to coordinate the nation's \$150 million a year spending on space research, currently distributed between the Department of Trade and Industry, the Science and Engineering Research Council, and the Ministry of Defense.

The new agency is intended to act as an effective base for an anticipated growth of 50 percent in Britain's space research efforts over the next few years.

In particular, it will provide a single focal point both for Britain's involvement with the European Space Agency (ESA)—through which almost 80 percent of the British space budget is currently spent—and for its participation in broader international projects. In particular these include the polar orbiter, which Britain is offering to contribute to the space platform currently under development by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The first director of the agency will be Roy Gibson, who was also the first director-general of ESA from its creation in 1974 until 1980. Gibson has recently been closely involved in negotiations with NASA over the terms of European participation in the space station.

In announcing plans for the new agency, Geoffrey Pattie, the Minister for Information Technology, said that it represented "a clear recognition in government circles of space as a leading-edge technology generator," as well as a "very exciting area for Britain to be involved in."

The creation of the agency was welcomed last week by William Mitchell, the new chairman of the research council which has been arguing for such a step for a long time. There has recently been mounting criticism of the impact which the council's growing commitment to the support of space research facilities has imposed on research spending in other disciplines.

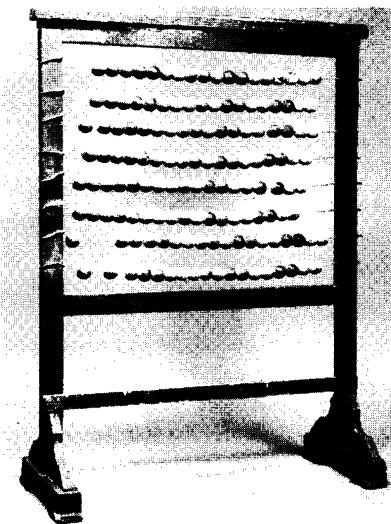
Similarly John Bowman, secretary of the Natural Environment Research Council which is heavily engaged in, the interpretation of data

obtained from remote sensing satellites—but has been reluctant to accept a high degree of responsibility for the satellites themselves—said he was pleased to see Pattie promise "a better balance between technology 'push' and user 'pull'."—**DAVID DICKSON**

Smithsonian to Feature Information Revolution

In his first major initiative since becoming secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Robert McCormick Adams has announced plans for a \$4.3-million exhibit on "the information revolution," which he characterized as "one of the most expensive and most thoroughly researched" that any museum has undertaken.

The Smithsonian claims the largest collection of computing and communications artifacts in the world, ranging from the first letter sent by Pony Express to an array of early computers.



Pioneer PC

Frame used to teach math to Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The exhibit, to be housed in a remodeled section of the National Museum of American History, will be at the cutting edge of museum display technology, with interactive machines taking the place of labels so visitors can ask as many questions as they want. Adams also said at a press conference that the exhibit will go beyond explaining things to exploring the impact on "every aspect of our

lives" of the communications revolution, which he compared in significance to the Industrial Revolution.

Adams hopes to get most of the new money for the exhibit from the computer and communications industries. Help is being supplied by Representative Norman Y. Mineta (D-Calif.), member of the institution's Board of Regents, who represents Silicon Valley.

The exhibit will open in 1989. Ultimately, the Smithsonian wants to devote a whole museum to the communications revolution.

—**CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

USDA Bows to Rifkin Call for Review of Seed Bank

In the wake of a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, the Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service is examining the way it operates and maintains its seed-bank system centered at Fort Collins, Colorado. Jeremy Rifkin of the Foundation on Economic Trends charges that the improper storage and inventorying of seeds is reducing the genetic diversity of plant species in the bank.

Orville Bentley, assistant secretary for science and education, noting that the department has been conducting its own review of the germ plasm program since last spring, on 18 November notified Rifkin that the ARS would conduct a formal environmental assessment. This is the first time the department has recognized that the seed program is subject to provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Rifkin sees this action as the forerunner to a more detailed environmental impact statement aimed at assessing the possible damage to the environment stemming from the loss of rare seed varieties in the germ plasm program. Because most of the collection remains inadequately described, Rifkin asserts that the bank's resources cannot be fully exploited. He adds that the ARS's seed bank samples are incomplete, because it tends to focus on commercially valuable strains rather than on other plant varieties.

"There is no real physical loss of