Poker Flat Priorities

■ Alaska could become the home of a new commercial rocket launch site, if a campaign by state officials and administrators at the University of Alaska succeeds. Yet the new venture threatens to interfere with atmospheric research funded by the National Science Foundation at the same location, according to university researchers.

Development of the Poker Flat Rocket Range, a remote research launch site in central Alaska, has occurred over the past 2 years as the Department of Defense invested $12.5 million to upgrade its launch facilities there. The ostensible justification for pumping military funds into Poker Flat, it seems, was Alaska Senator Ted Stevens' (R) enthusiasm for a scheme that would tap into the energy of the *Aurora Borealis* to produce electricity (*Science*, 23 November 1990, p. 1073). But now state officials intend to capitalize on the federal expenditure with their own plan—an ambitious $3-million construction project that would double the size of the launch facility. Alaskan Commissioner of Economic Development Glen Olds says the state has already attracted the attention of several aerospace companies, including British Aerospace, Rolls-Royce Motors Inc., and MicroSat, a Virginia-based startup.

University scientists, however, are worried that big commercial money could shoulder aside their basic research. Research payloads often sit on the launch pad for weeks or months until atmospheric conditions are just right, and Neil Brown, an associate professor of physics and a former manager of the launch site, says commercial operations might elbow out such payloads. University officials, however, are touting the bottom line: Jack Dillard, the manager of Poker Flat, says the university "will benefit financially from the commercial activity."

Overhead Obfuscation

■ The research community's sensitivity to the issue of indirect costs seems to extend well beyond the walls of academe. In an attempt to compare universities' much-scrutinized indirect costs with those of other research institutions, *Science* recently undertook an informal survey of national laboratories, nonprofit research foundations, and industry. The result? A handful of suspiciously low numbers—and several cases where institutions bluntly refused to discuss the matter at all.

Several national laboratories say they recover indirect costs at a rate almost half that of major research universities. Spokespeople emphasized that national laboratories have an older building stock and aggressively pursue cost containment.

Laboratory insiders, however, say administrators are being devious. Since indirect costs are calculated as a percentage of what accountants call "modified direct costs"—essentially the direct costs of research minus certain expenses—an artificially high modified direct cost could result in an artificially low indirect cost rate.

Argonne National Laboratory

Does Argonne National Laboratory understate its overhead costs?

Institution	Indirect Cost Rate
Argonne National Laboratory	25%
Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory	34%
Jet Propulsion Laboratory	23%
Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory	55%
Los Alamos National Laboratories	n.a.
Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research	60%
Scripps Clinic and Foundation	65%
IBM-Yorktown Heights	n.a.
AT&T Bell Laboratories	n.a.

Researchers told *Science* that grant proposals at national labs are sometimes inflated because they overestimate salaries, materials, and support services. As a result, the true overhead rates could be much higher—as high as 150% by one informal estimate.

The situation in industry proved even more difficult to ascertain. IBM and Bell Labs both refused to divulge their indirect costs, saying the information was "too sensitive" to make public. (One IBM researcher, however, told *Science* the overhead rate was "about 100%" nearly a year ago.) And at Battelle Memorial Institute, which receives 60% of its income from federal grants, a representative also declined to provide indirect cost information, saying it was "business sensitive."

NIH Overwhelmed by Response to Women's Health Initiative

■ Officials at the National Institutes of Health have been surprised and pleased by the overwhelming response to a new initiative on women's health proposed just weeks ago by NIH director Bernadine Healy. Although NIH hasn't counted the inquiries it has received from interested women, doctors, and community leaders, an NIH spokesperson says the response has been "enormous."

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Bernadine Healy

Within days after taking the helm at NIH, Healy announced plans for a three-tiered effort to study the health of middle-aged and older women. The program, focusing on cancer, cardiovascular disease, and osteoporosis, will include a large prospective survey, a community intervention study, and a series of randomized clinical trials. Several of NIH's institutes will be involved in the research, and the 10-year cost has been pegged at $500 million.

Although the price tag guarantees close scrutiny, NIH watchers say the initiative reflects Healy's political acumen. It satisfies a congressional desire to see NIH spend more money on women's health, yet avoids areas identified as taboo by the Bush Administration—such as post-conception methods of birth control and fetal tissue transplant research—by focusing on women who are beyond reproductive age.

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