Air Force Geophysicists Reject Continental Move

A plan to shift a geophysics lab from Boston to Albuquerque has drawn protests from researchers around the world

BEFORE THE NEW YEAR GETS MUCH OLDER, Jim Whalen may face an unpleasant decision. For 24 years, Whalen has worked as a civilian physicist for the U.S. Air Force at a military geophysics laboratory outside Boston, studying auroras and other phenomena of Earth's ionosphere at high latitudes. But now, as part of a cost-cutting reorganization of the Air Force's entire R&D system, Air Force officials want Whalen and more than 500 of his colleagues to move to Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Unless Air Force Secretary Donald Rice blocks the move, Whalen and other civilian employees either will have to relocate or leave their jobs.

The planned move of the laboratory, which conducts a broad range of basic and applied research, has drawn protests and warnings from scientists around the world who say the relocation may damage the lab irreparably. Even if the shift makes sense on an organization chart, the Air Force is being told, many senior researchers may find it so disruptive that they will retire rather than move. (Indeed, that's exactly what Whalen says he plans to do.) And it is not just the change of location that troubles them: They also worry that a change in supervisory authority will lead to a decline in basic research.

More than 200 critical letters have poured in to Rice and D. Allan Bromley, President Bush's science adviser. They include a prediction from James Van Allen, discoverer of the radiation belts around Earth that bear his name, that the laboratory's "identity and integrity would be destroyed, most of its key personnel would be lost, and many years would be required to reassemble and reestablish its special competence and value." The lab is the service's only source of expertise on issues such as how the ionosphere affects satellite broadcasts and the impact of weather on smart weapons, a field on which the Air Force spent more than $100 million in 1991.

What's happening to the geophysics lab is, however, likely to be repeated across the military R&D spectrum as the Defense Department slims down its $40-billion-a-year research system to adapt to the post-cold war era. The relocation proposal is a consequence of a decision in December 1990 to streamline the Air Force Systems Command, which develops and procures new Air Force weapons systems, such as planes, rockets, and satellites. The Air Force merged the Systems Command's 14 research organizations into four "superlaboratories" that are to provide tailored scientific expertise for the procurement system. Creation of three of the labs was not controversial because they mostly involved reshuffling organizations that were already located together.* But creation of the fourth superlab—the Phillips Laboratory at Kirtland, focusing on space, missiles, and directed energy weapons—has been more problematic because its components are scattered across the country. Bureaucratically, the lab was formed in December 1990, by combining the Air Force Weapons Laboratory at Kirtland with the Geophysics Laboratory at Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts and the Air Force Astronautics Laboratory at Edwards Air Force Base in California. The next step will be to move all the workers at Hanscom and Edwards to Kirtland.

Air Force officials argue that allowing the work to remain split among three sites would keep Phillips from developing the scientific synergy that underlies the superlaboratory concept. "You can certainly share data over faxes and information nets, but you cannot create an interdisciplinary team to focus on a problem unless those people are physically co-located with each other," says Alan Bruce Goldstayn, the Systems Command's director of plans and programs.

Forced march. *The Air Force Geophysics Laboratory at Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts.*

Critics warn, however, that seasoned researchers are likely to balk at the move. More than half of the geophysics directorate's staff already is eligible for retirement, notes Barbara Main, a union official. By the time a move is complete, within 5 to 6 years, that figure could hit 70%, she says. Many younger, bright scientists may prefer to seek other jobs in the Boston area rather than move to New Mexico, which one geophysics scientist called "an intellectual desert" by comparison. "We're really part of this area here, and it's part of us," says Whalen, who notes that researchers at the geophysics directorate have extensive collaborations with scientists at Boston-area research universities.

The researchers are also leery of being tied more firmly to the Air Force Systems Command. "It will kill our basic research," warns John Klobuchar, a physical scientist who has worked at the geophysics lab for more than 30 years. The military officers at the Phillips lab will be interested only in research directly tied to specific procurement programs, he says.

The fate of the Hanscom researchers now lies with Rice. He had been expected to make a decision in early January, but at a mid-December briefing, Rice instructed the Systems Command to provide more information on the costs of the relocation, now said to be in the vicinity of $100 million.

However, the geophysicists may be able to take some cheer from a decision that Rice did make at that December meeting. Under heavy lobbying from New York legislators, Rice rejected a plan to move one superlaboratory—the Rome Laboratory—from Griffiss Air Force Base in New York to Hanscom. The critics of the move have taken note: The National Federation of Federal Employees, which represents the scientists and other workers at Hanscom, has been working closely with the Massachusetts congressional delegation to oppose the proposal. If protest letters from scientists don't do the trick, they may try using some political muscle. ■ VINCENT KIERNAN

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*Those three are the Armstrong Laboratory at Brooks Air Force Base, Texas, which conducts research on human systems; Rome Laboratory at Griffiss Air Force Base, New York, which focuses on command, control, communications, and intelligence; and Wright Laboratory at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, which works on aircraft technologies.