

EPA Douses Idea for an Oil Spill "Burn"

Plans for a large-scale study of fire as a tool for cleaning up oil spills have gone up in smoke because of objections raised by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Alaska Clean Seas (ACS), a research cooperative funded by 12 oil and gas companies, had planned to spill and burn 42,000 gallons of oil in Northern Alaska's Beaufort Sea during a briefly hospitable 4 to 6 week window this summer (*Science*, 13 September 1991, p. 1203). Researchers in academia and industry, as well as some environmentalists, say that the study would have provided important data on using fire as a cleanup tool and on coping with spills in rough and relatively inaccessible areas.



ALAN A. ALLEN/SPILTEC

Light my fire. Researchers torch a 500-gallon oil slick—a tiny version of a proposed cleanup experiment in Alaska—off the coast of Norway.

EPA, however, refused to issue a permit by 1 May, the last date by which ACS could still secure contracts and train personnel. John Cunningham, chief of EPA's Oil

Pollution Response and Abatement division, contends that the ACS proposal failed to answer a number of important questions, such as why the experiment re-

quired a new oil spill and why the proposed spill had to be so large.

But proponents of the experiment say the problem was that EPA was completely unprepared to deal with their proposal. A 19 February EPA memo obtained by *Science* supports their contention by revealing that the agency hadn't received a similar request for more than a decade and had no mechanism to shepherd the ACS proposal through a maze of regulations. In the memo, written 2 months after ACS submitted its proposal, an EPA official merely described plans to create an "informal" group that would consider the planned experiment.

The proposal, however, is not quite dead: An ACS official says the group may take it to Norway or the former Soviet Union.

Administration to Offer Manufacturing Aid

Next January, the Bush Administration will formally embrace the idea of using federal funds and clout to assist private companies in their research and development of advanced manufacturing systems. If all goes according to plan, the White House science office says, the president will announce a multi-agency initiative aimed at coordinating and bolstering the existing efforts of individual federal agencies.

On 23 June, a high-level inter-agency panel formally recommended including the advanced manufacturing initiative in the fiscal 1994 budget. It's too soon to say how much money President Bush will request for it, but similar interagency activities have typically increased the amount already approved for programs that fall within the scope of the initiative.

While the new venture is broad in scope, the basic idea is fairly simple. According to White

House science official Eugene Wong, it will integrate existing federal activities into an overall program for developing low-volume, "flexible" manufacturing—in effect, what Wong calls a sort of "programmable factory" that can assemble a variety of different products using the same equipment. Such techniques are increasingly in demand both in the private sector and among federal agencies, he says, particularly in the shrinking defense sector.

ADAMHA Plan Back From the Grave

The on-again, off-again plan to shift research elements of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) into NIH—last left for dead after a legislative spat over a provision related to needle exchange programs—is not only



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back on again, it was signed into law by President Bush on 10 July. Now NIH stands to gain three new institutes for the study of mental health, alcoholism, and drug abuse on 1 October.

Supporters of the measure have long argued that the transfer would increase ADAMHA's efficiency by centralizing research functions at NIH and locating services such as treatment programs and counseling in another agency. "This change will strengthen both the research and the service missions of the federal government," said Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), one of the bill's sponsors.

Conflict? What Conflict?

NIH is still struggling, it seems, to define exactly what constitutes a conflict of interest on ethical review panels—4 years after the agency stumbled over an apparent conflict of interest in its investigation of the "Baltimore case."

The agency's latest situation began in 1987 when Charles McCutchen, an NIH biophysicist, accused Van Mow, a Columbia bioengineer, of renaming an older theory of how joints such as elbows and knees are lubricated and claiming it as his own. Mow denied the allegation, and a three-member panel convened by NIH to examine the allegations unanimously agreed in late 1990 that Mow had not committed scientific misconduct.

About a year later, however, MIT biomedical engineer Robert Mann wrote to NIH to complain that one member of that panel—Wilson Hayes, a biomechanician at Harvard—had been coediting a book with Mow at the time of the investigation. In an 18 March letter to Mann, NIH Director Bernadine

Healy acknowledged that her legal adviser had determined that Hayes and Mow were coeditors at the time but said that NIH had found "no evidence that Dr. Hayes was actually biased in carrying out his review."

While Mann and McCutchen saw Hayes' situation as a clear conflict of interest, Healy did not order the investigation reopened, although she did hedge her position by requesting an internal NIH review of the panel's conclusions and of Hayes' "apparent conflict of interest." Neither review is yet complete.

NIH's uncertainty in the McCutchen case is reminiscent of its 1988 misconduct inquiry into a paper coauthored by Nobel laureate David Baltimore. The first three-member panel NIH assembled included a scientist who had coauthored a text with Baltimore and another who had worked with him as a postdoc. After congressional overseers criticized the panel's membership, NIH quickly disbanded it and convened another.