

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

Massey Seeks to Broaden NSF's Role

The National Science Board last week endorsed a controversial new priority for the National Science Foundation (NSF), one that would broaden NSF's research portfolio to include more research of direct interest to industry. The shift, which is being promoted by NSF director Walter Massey as part of a strategic plan for the agency, is intended to make NSF the lead federal agency in transferring the results of basic research from the academic community to the marketplace. NSF's new goals are outlined in a memo from Massey to the board, dated 14 August, that the board approved in principle at its meeting last week. The board decided, however, to give the scientific community a chance to comment on this proposed change of direction: It voted unanimously to create a commission to examine NSF's future.

Massey's memo states that the agency should move away from its historical roots as "a small agency predominantly dedicated to the support of individual investigators and small groups at universities." Instead, wrote Massey, it should adopt an expanded array of research programs that would be "closely aligned with industry and other government agencies." To accomplish this, the memo suggests, NSF should try to lower the intellectual fences between disciplines and between basic and applied research, encourage interaction between all players in the research arena, expand its efforts in developing human resources, and do more to demonstrate the value of federal investment in research. How would all this be accomplished? "It is much too soon to provide details on what NSF might look like in the next stage of its evolution," Massey wrote in his memo, but he pledged to seek input from both the science board and the external scientific community on how to implement these new missions for the agency.

Though the science board is behind Massey's plan now, it was not so enthusiastic when it saw an earlier version in June (*Science*, 14 August, p. 872). According to the provisional minutes of the closed session of the June board meeting, the plan provoked "a lengthy, spirited discussion concerning the role of basic research. Several members stated the importance of emphasizing NSF's primary mission to support basic research within the strategic vision."

Massey is likely to get a similar message from the broader scientific community when the commission established by the board last week takes a look at the agency's long-term goals. According to board chairman James

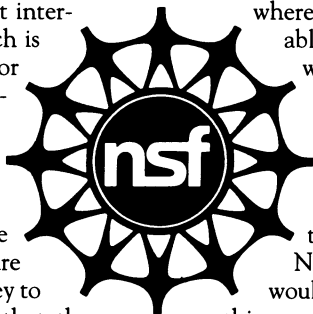
Duderstadt, president of the University of Michigan, the commission members will be appointed as soon as possible, and the panel will hold a series of three public meetings where all interested parties will be able to offer their views about where NSF should be headed.

It may strike some as ironic that NSF is contemplating a major expansion of its role at a time when its budget is unlikely even to keep pace with inflation. The House version of NSF's appropriation bill for 1993 would hold spending for research at this year's level of \$1.879 billion, and the Senate version of the bill—approved by committee and awaiting action by the full Senate—would actually cut that figure by \$20 million. Agency officials say, however, that NSF needs to set new strategic goals, no matter what the immediate funding prospects look like.

Massey may find his immediate options

limited not just by budget pressures. The Senate Appropriations Committee has also given him some instructions about how he should run his agency. In a report that accompanied the Senate appropriations bill, the committee makes a series of prescriptive commands for how NSF should spend its budget: \$50 million on interdisciplinary environmental research, \$50 million for academic facilities and instrumentation, \$2 million for a supercomputer/advanced telecommunications test bed. The committee also suggests some strategic changes for the agency, including catering more to the needs of industry, expanding programs to include non-academic personnel, and working more closely with other federal agencies. While Massey says that in many instances his ideas jibe with the committee's, he wants more of a free hand in running his agency, and he has requested a meeting with Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), chairman of the subcommittee that wrote the offending report. Whatever the outcome of that meeting, Massey is already discovering that there is no shortage of opinions on what NSF's priorities should be.

—Joseph Palca



AIDS VACCINES

Liability Bill Introduced in Congress

In an attempt to "gain control" of concerns over AIDS vaccine liability, Representative Pete Stark (D-CA) introduced a bill on 12 August that would protect responsible manufacturers from costly lawsuits filed by recipients of experimental or approved vaccines. "From discussions with advocacy groups, industry, academia, and the government research and regulatory agencies, there is unanimity on the point that AIDS vaccine research efforts have been inhibited by the issue of liability," Stark said when he presented the "AIDS Vaccine Development and Compensation Act of 1992" on the floor of the House. "What this legislation does is...minimize these concerns." An aide to Stark said an article in the 10 April issue of *Science*, detailing how concerns over liability are hampering AIDS vaccine programs, brought this issue to the congressman's attention.

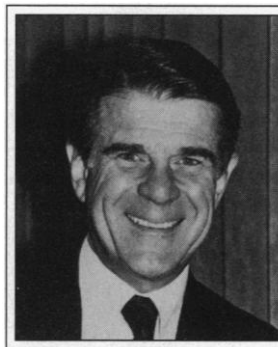
The bill is modeled after the National Childhood Vaccine Compensation Act, a law passed in 1986 that pays people injured by one of several childhood vaccines, without requiring them to go through a lengthy court trial. If Stark's bill were to pass—which insiders say is unlikely this congressional session—people injured by AIDS vaccines

would be compensated by a trust fund that would be entirely supported by the vaccine developers. People claiming to have been injured would not be allowed to sue manufacturers for civil, punitive, or exemplary damages until they have exhausted the legal process set up by the AIDS Vaccine Development and Compensation Program. Injured parties would be compensated for unreimbursed medical care and rehabilitation, loss of wages, and counseling. Pain and suffering would be capped at \$300,000, which also is the amount families would receive in the event that an AIDS vaccine kills someone. These rules apply only if the vaccine in question was approved by a branch of the government, properly prepared, and accompanied by

appropriate warnings and directions. Manufacturers could, however, be sued immediately if they are alleged to have engaged in fraud or to have wrongfully withheld information about the vaccine's safety and effectiveness.

Stark, who chairs the health subcommittee of the Ways and Means Committee, plans to organize hearings on the bill in the next few months.

—Jon Cohen



Representative Stark