

## GAO Probing Alleged DARPA 'Favoritism'

Technology policy is all the rage in Washington this fall, but the most admired agent of government-led technical innovation—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)—seems destined for a critical review of its technology support program by the General Accounting Office (GAO) this winter.

According to a GAO staffer, DARPA has offended a group of computer manufacturers by the way it distributes its funds in the marketplace. By spending its money selectively on certain advanced machines and not handing out subsidies to all comers, DARPA has made enemies in the community of high-speed parallel processor computer makers, who argue that they have been subject to unfair competition. After these companies appealed to the House Armed Services Committee for help, the committee in turn ordered up the GAO investigation. This inquiry, which has turned into a management review reaching beyond parallel computer purchases, should be finished by spring.

Meanwhile, those who provoked the inquiry are keeping mum. A spokesperson for DARPA critic Maspar Computer Corp. of Sunnyvale, California, for example, declined to comment but acknowledged keen interest in the GAO study.



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**Spraying the field.** Land-grant ag researchers can anticipate another reform-minded study.

## Agricultural Research Under Scrutiny—Again

The United States' main network for the performance and application of agricultural research—the land-grant college and university system—has essentially marched in place for much of the past 75 years while the face of American agriculture changed dramatically. So says the National Research Council (NRC), which is gearing up a 3-year, \$1.3 million study aimed at showing the system's mostly state-based administrators how to deploy their resources better in a world where biotechnology and technology development have taken on added importance.

Proposed reforms in the land-grant system, which has suffered

from parochial congressional oversight and shrinking budgets for much of the past decade, are nothing new, of course. "For the past 5 to 8 years, the system has had all these agonizing exercises in self-evaluation," says Susan Offutt, director of the NRC's Board on Agriculture. "There's been a lot of rhetoric, but it's not clear that much has happened except when people have been forced, usually by a cut in their budget."

What makes the proposed NRC study different, say Offutt and other agricultural observers, is its analytical approach. The study's first phase will consist of drawing together data on the system's infrastructure and comparing it with the tasks at hand. "We'll look for anomalies like colleges with a forestry experimental station where there's no forestry industry in the state," says Offutt. The NRC panel can then take its findings back to faculty, administrators, and state officials to "confront them with reality," she says. With subsequent input from the members of the community, the panel can then draw up its own recommendations for systemic changes.

## EPA Panel Tangled in Industry Strings

An Environmental Protection Agency commission engaged in a controversial study of the Grand Canyon's persistent haze problem has hit a roadblock—a struggle over strings attached to \$2 million in research funding offered by a consortium of western utilities.

Earlier this spring, the year-old commission released a work plan designed to fill some of the knowledge gaps about how haze forms in the Grand Canyon and how it might be mitigated (*Science*, 29 May, p. 1267). But the commission wound up short of the \$2 million it needed for the battery of studies it had proposed. In rode WEST Associates, a firm that represents 17 western utilities, which announced it would pay \$2 million to the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) to help conduct the studies.

EPRI, however, proposed to do more than the commission had bargained for—including carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of haze-reducing alternatives that wasn't required in the Clean Air Act, which authorized the commission. "Their task is to define how to improve visibility, not put a price on it," says Roger Clark, vice president for conservation at the Grand Canyon Trust, an environmental organization based in Flagstaff, Arizona.

In meetings earlier this week and next month, the commission plans to resolve how much control it will have over the money and how it will be spent. Environmentalists say if the commission can't grab control of the money, it should disavow research done outside its mandate. "We're not suggesting the work plan might be biased, but we're looking at it closely—appearance counts," says a commission staffer. Industry, meanwhile, apparently wants to avoid a showdown. "We want everyone involved in developing the work plan, including environmentalists," says C.V. Mathai of WEST Associates. "We want the honest truth."

## Panel Set to Critique AIDS Vaccine Award

A panel of heavy-hitting researchers convened by NIH Director Bernadine Healy will gather for its first public meeting on 5 November to critique Congress's recent \$20 million appropriation to the Department of Defense for the testing of one company's therapeutic AIDS vaccine.

The heavily criticized legislation was largely the handiwork of well-connected lobbyists for Connecticut's MicroGeneSys Inc. (*Science*, 9 October, p. 211 and 23 October, p. 536). The legislation calls for a large-scale human trial of the company's vaccine to determine whether the preparation can boost the immune systems of HIV-infected people and extend their lives.

Aside from Healy, the blue-ribbon panel will include four NIH institute directors; Food and Drug Administration (FDA) commissioner David Kessler and

two other FDA officials; AIDS researchers Charles Carpenter of Brown University and David Ho, head of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center; Mark Harrington of New York's Treatment Action Group; and possibly an HIV-positive vaccine recipient.

Healy, who has condemned Congress for legislating the human testing of an experimental preparation, called this panel together to cast its vote on whether the MicroGeneSys trial should go forward. If the panel finds the trial premature—which many researchers, including those in the Army, believe to be the case—its members will discuss how the money might be better spent evaluating the merits of this kind of "vaccine therapy" approach. Healy also wants the panel to discuss this new twist in the politicization of AIDS, with an eye toward figuring out how to protect the science from the whims of elected officials.