

Congress Split on Best Way To Reshape Network of Labs

Reducing the size of the federal bureaucracy was a bread-and-butter issue for the Republicans who took over Congress in January. And the Department of Energy's (DOE's) \$6 billion network of national laboratories seemed like a tempting morsel. But 9 months later, congressional plates are loaded down with competing plans to reform the DOE labs, and the issue is giving majority members a case of indigestion. Their discomfort seems likely to delay adoption of any reform plans until at least next year.

An all-day hearing last week by two House Science Committee panels revealed that there is consensus on two points: The current system is too expensive, and the labs would benefit from greater autonomy in the way they operate. "We've got a crazy system in place, and we have to take it apart," DOE Deputy Secretary Charles Curtis told lawmakers. But there's little agreement on just how far it should be dismantled. A plan under consideration by the Administration

that would cut \$1.4 billion in lab-related funding and reduce staff by 10% within the next 5 years looks distinctly timid to some Republicans. "The labs are now programs in search of rationales," said Representative Todd Tiahrt (R-KS), one of a phalanx of freshmen legislators who want to eliminate DOE and reduce the number of labs and their missions to ease the nation's deficit. Tiahrt has introduced a bill to do just that, and he's assembled more than 50 co-sponsors (see table).

But other Republicans are more sympathetic to Curtis. Representative Steve Schiff (R-NM), who chairs the committee's basic research panel and has a major lab in his district, has introduced a bill that would give Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary plenty of leeway on how and how fast to proceed. At the same time, Representative Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD) has proposed an independent commission that would examine the labs and recommend possible closures and consolidations. The one Democratic plan,

offered by Representative Tim Roemer (D-IN), would reduce lab staff by one third and limit the kinds of research that could be done over the next decade.

DOE managers and their congressional allies like Schiff argue that a major overhaul is already under way, the details of which will be part of a strategic plan to be completed by December. In his testimony, Curtis rejected the idea of a lab-closing commission and warned that setting narrow missions for the large multipurpose labs could cripple fundamental research. The department is slashing in half the number of directives dealing with employee and contractor conduct and what Curtis called "the proliferation of uncoordi-

nated, burdensome reviews," and trimming by 60% the number of personnel who oversee these rules and reviews. DOE is also simplifying the rules for contractors who manage DOE facilities and adopting more efficient commercial practices.

Paying attention. Lab directors who testified last week complain that congressional attempts to dictate changes ignore what is already happening. "We are radically overhauling the laboratories, and these guys don't even know it," Sigfried Hecker, director of Los Alamos National Laboratory, told *Science*. "We've reoriented our mission, and in less than 2 months we will have 1000 fewer people." The number of employees at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is also heading down, Director Bruce Tartar told the panels, having dropped by 15% in recent years, to 7300.

But those reductions don't impress Robert Galvin, the Motorola chief who chaired a lab review released in February that urged a more radical approach (*Science*, 10 February, p. 787). Galvin told the House subcommittees that DOE could save one third of its lab budget—or about \$2 billion—by turning the facilities over to a quasi-private organization run like a company but funded by the government through block grants. "You could keep every bench engineer and scientist... and just cut overhead," he said. Public accountants and a large measure of trust would ensure the money was spent properly, Galvin maintains.

While some Republicans were intrigued with the idea, which Galvin calls corporatization, others were scornful. "If I trusted everyone, we'd have wheelbarrows going down the hall full of money with all these special interest groups," said Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), who chairs the House Science energy and environment subcommittee. Galvin was unabashed, however. Citing his 55 years of experience as a successful businessman, he said to Rohrabacher, who was elected in 1988, "I don't know whether [someone who has been] a member of Congress for 3 or 4 years can appreciate this."

For now, the more measured approach proposed by Schiff and Curtis appears to have the upper hand. While freshman lawmakers like Tiahrt have the support of leaders like House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), they don't control the levers of power in the committees that pass legislation. And congressional efforts to reform the executive branch are expected to focus on the Commerce Department this fall. Predicts one House staffer: "Nothing is going to happen [to DOE] until January."

In the meantime, however, DOE's critics have warned agency officials that they will be watching closely for signs of meaningful reform. If there's no discernible progress, expect a congressional feeding frenzy.

—Andrew Lawler

FOUR VIEWS OF DOE LABS		
Bill	Purpose	Sponsor
H.R. 2142 Department of Energy Laboratories Mission Act	Defines lab missions, directs Energy Secretary to streamline as necessary	Rep. Steve Schiff (R-NM) 
H.R. 1993 Department of Energy Abolishment Act	Eliminates DOE, creates commission to determine fate of labs	Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R-KS) 
H.R. 87 Department of Energy Laboratory Facilities Act of 1995	Establishes independent commission to make recommendations to Congress on possible closures and consolidations	Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD) 
H.R. 1510 Department of Energy Laboratories Efficiencies Improvement Act	Reduces lab staff by one third, terminates duplicative research, promotes use of university and private sector labs	Rep. Tim Roemer (D-IN) 

SOURCE: U.S. CONGRESS