



ANTITERRORISM

USDA Closes Lab Doors To Foreign Scientists

To guard against terrorism, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will no longer apply for visas to permit foreign scientists and students to work in its labs. The policy, which went into effect last month with little fanfare, is prompting an outcry from critics, who say it is an overreaction to legitimate concerns about national security that could weaken U.S. agricultural science. It also runs counter to pronouncements by high-ranking Bush Administration officials about the importance of international cooperation in science.

"It could be a disaster," says Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The academy's 150-member section on agricultural and environmental science has asked Alberts to intervene to undo the policy, which came as a surprise to presidential science adviser John Marburger. Speaking last week at the academy's annual meeting in Washington, D.C., Marburger said there would be no "edict" from the Bush Administration to limit the influx of foreign scientists and that his office had "educated" several departments about the importance of scientific exchanges. When Alberts asked him after his speech about the policy, however, Marburger said that he did not know about it but that, in his view, it was "not a very good idea."

Some 200 foreign scientists and students currently work in labs of USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS). Most are employed under so-called H1-B visas, which allow the temporary entry of scientifically or technically skilled foreign nationals. The new policy, which was relayed to ARS personnel in a 12 April memo by ARS acting Administrator Edward Knipling, allows researchers already in place to stay until their visas expire. But they will not be able to apply for extensions. In addition, the department will not sponsor any new visa applications. There will be no exceptions for scientists whose country of origin or research interests would appear to pose little risk. "It's just easier for us to do this across the board," says a spokesperson

for Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman.

Foreign researchers can still work in ARS labs if they are hired by other organizations such as universities. ARS labs with close ties to a university may try to go this route, says wheat researcher James Cook of Washington State University, Pullman, who spent 33 years at ARS, although he says it would mean "transferring the burden of the paperwork and the responsibility." Foreign nationals who are permanent residents of the United States also will not be affected by the new policy.

As the custodian of the nation's food supply, USDA has made terrorism prevention a



Fear factor. New policy makes it more difficult for foreign scientists to work at ARS labs such as this one in Beltsville, Maryland.

top priority since 11 September. Its labs, some of which handle dangerous agricultural pathogens such as the foot-and-mouth disease virus, are obvious potential targets. The new policy follows the results of an investigation by the Department of Justice into seven pending visa applications sponsored by USDA; three of the scientists were deemed security risks. The department is also investigating several cases in which foreigners ap-

parently used USDA-sponsored visas to enter the country but did not show up at their labs. The department has neither the authority nor the funds to carry out background checks, according to the spokesperson.

But USDA researchers say the department is shooting itself in the foot by adopting a blanket policy that limits all foreign nationals' access to its labs. "It's going to make it more difficult to get good researchers," says James Tumlinson, a team leader at ARS's Center for Medical, Agricultural, and Veterinary Entomology in Gainesville, Florida, which currently employs five foreign scientists. Researchers also argue that scientific exchange is important for international development, which could ultimately help prevent terrorism. "This is a throwback to a very conservative approach, and it sends the wrong message," says Cook.

NAS members who are agricultural scientists were "deeply distressed" during a meeting of the group 2 weeks ago, says Ellis Cowling of North Carolina State University in Raleigh, and they adopted a resolution urging Alberts to use his influence to change the policy. Likewise, members of the National Research Council's Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources have spoken with high-level USDA officials, says that panel's chair, Harley Moon of Iowa State University in Ames. The board is considering a study of foreign scientists' contributions to U.S. agricultural science.

USDA critics believe that they also have U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell on their side. Powell spoke a few hours before Marburger at the NAS annual meeting and told his listeners that scientific collaboration could foster peace and stability. He urged them to "help us to share know-how and promote science education all around the world."

The new policy follows an earlier USDA policy shift that makes it more difficult for foreign physicians to remain in the United States. Immigration law requires exchange students to return to their home countries for at least 2 years before they're eligible to apply for a new visa. But under a special waiver program, medical graduates sponsored by USDA or one of three other government agencies are allowed to stay in the United States if they agree to spend the time as a doctor in an underserved rural area. The department, which supported the program to foster economic development in agricultural communities, withdrew from it in February.

—MARTIN ENSERINK

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