

US research costs

Pressure builds in Congress

Washington

RESPONDING to howls of indignation from US universities and Congress, the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) now says it is willing to delay implementing new regulations for compensating universities for the indirect costs associated with federal grants.

Joseph Wright, deputy director of OMB, made the offer to postpone implementation until 1 July at a meeting of the House of Representatives subcommittee on science research and technology to consider the planned changes. Members of the subcommittee were dismayed by OMB's "haste" to make sweeping changes to Circular A-21, the document providing the blueprint for cost reimbursement. The proposed revisions would limit the reimbursement for administrative costs to a fixed percentage of the total amount of a grant; 26 per cent in 1986, dropping to 20 per cent in 1987.

OMB estimates the move will save \$300 million over the next two fiscal years. OMB published its proposed changes in the *Federal Register* on 12 February, with a comment period of only 30 days. The revisions were to take effect from 1 April, although individual agencies were allowed to delay implementation for up to a year, and most had said they would need at least until 1 July to change their procedures.

Even before the new regulations were announced, the university community was seething over rumours of OMB's plans (see *Nature* 319, 346; 1986). The complaints were that OMB was making the changes without consulting those affected, and that the 26 per cent figure was arbitrary, not reflecting varying needs in different institutions. When the changes were finally announced, universities were indignant at the short period allowed for comment, complaining that OMB could not be very interested in what they had to say.

Since 12 February, university presidents and their allies in Congress have unleashed a flood of letters to OMB protesting the changes. Forced into a conciliatory posture before the subcommittee, Wright was nonetheless unwilling to extend the 30-day comment period. He did, however, agree to meet Dale Corson, chairman of the Government/University/Industry Roundtable, to establish an agenda for discussions in the coming weeks. In addition, subcommittee chairman Doug Walgren (Democrat, Pennsylvania) indicated that his committee would continue to take testimony on the amendments, and would require OMB to respond to them.

Joseph Palca

British astronomy

Time for Greenwich to move

A DECISION has finally been made about the fate of the two ground-based observatories in Britain. The Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC), which supports the Royal Greenwich Observatory (based, since 1948, at Herstmonceux in Sussex) and the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, announced last week that the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) will be moved yet again. A final decision will be made in June between the three sites now under consideration: "in order of priority", Edinburgh and the Universities of Cambridge and Manchester.

The need for some decision arises from the steady replacement of British-based optical instruments by more advanced equipment at overseas observatories, chiefly at La Palma in the mid-Atlantic and Hawaii. Although the two British observatories have provided technical and managerial support for the overseas observatories, the role of RGO in this connection will be much reduced from 1990, with the completion of the 4.3-m John Herschel reflector at the La Palma observatory. Although SERC plans to decide on the eventual location of RGO at its meeting in June, the move will not take place until 1990.

Plainly, SERC has found its decision about the location of RGO exceedingly difficult to make. The need for some reorganization has been apparent for some five years, and has been an urgent issue since November 1984, when SERC put in hand a reappraisal of its pattern of spending. But a working party under the previous chairman of SERC, Sir John Kingman, which produced a list of options for the council in January of this year, was apparently unable to decide between them. It will not be possible to confirm rumours that the Kingman group recommended a continuation of the status quo because, according to Professor E.J.W. Mitchell, now the chairman of SERC, its report will not be published.

At the same time, the possibility of British withdrawal from the Anglo-Australian Telescope has been postponed, at least until 1990. This became a live issue roughly a year ago, when continued British collaboration at the Australian site, which costs SERC £1.5 million a year, was given a low priority by the Astronomy and Space Board of SERC. Australians were quick to point out that the collaboration is regulated by a formal treaty between Britain and Australia with no break clause. Now, it seems, discussions are under way with other potential partners, including Japan, which may lead to a change of status for the Anglo-Australian Telescope, but not before the end of the decade.

SERC's intention is that the move of

RGO from the Herstmonceux site will be self-financing, at least so far as capital costs are concerned. The chief, but still uncertain, element in any such calculation is the value of the fifteenth century castle which dominates the observatory's site in Sussex. One imponderable is the likely value of the building on the open market. Another is whether SERC would be allowed by the British Treasury to keep the whole proceeds of a successful sale.

According to Mitchell last week, the intention is that RGO should retain its separate identity even when it has moved to another site. To the extent that both RGO and Edinburgh provide instrumental and engineering support for overseas telescopes, the two large optical instruments at La Palma and the infrared and millimetre-wave telescopes in Hawaii (the second of which is now nearing completion), the advantages of a merger at Edinburgh are plain. But SERC is also aware of the benefits of siting RGO at a university where astronomy is already strong. One of SERC's disappointments in the present arrangements is plainly that the connection between RGO and the University of Sussex, 20 miles away, is "not the kind of interaction we are looking for", according to Mitchell.

For the time being, there are no firm plans to save recurrent costs by the proposed move, although the Astronomy and Space Board is already committed to reducing its expenditure by £1.5 million a year in the interests of SERC's flexibility. Steps have already been taken to consult trades unions representing staff at RGO.

Among the complications of the move now foreseen are the need to continue the work of the Nautical Almanac Office to which RGO now makes only a nominal contribution. The work of the laser-ranging unit based at RGO will be continued if suitable arrangements can be reached with the Ministry of Defence and with the Department of Trade and Industry. SERC seems conscious of the need to preserve and make accessible the archive of RGO, but not necessarily at the site to which RGO as a whole will move.

By the time the eventual location of RGO is decided in June, more may be known of the long-term relationship between SERC and the National Space Centre established last year by the British government, but still largely a paper entity. The possibility that SERC might become one of the contributors to this organization, which would be used as a vehicle for carrying through space research projects now under the wing of the Astronomy and Space Research Board, is being considered, but negotiations have not yet been completed. □