

learning. Kellye Eversole, a Washington lobbyist for the Corn Growers' Association, says that this year's budget language deliberately gave the NSF plenty of flexibility. "No-one wanted to be real prescriptive," she says. "But if it doesn't go in the right direction, we'll be more prescriptive next year."

Eversole is perplexed by complaints from scientists that Congress imposed the initiative on the NSF. "The scientific community seems to be okay with the president setting priorities, but not with the Congress setting priorities", she says.

These complaints will come more to the fore next year, however, if the NSF's budget comes under pressure and Congress tries to protect the plant genome programme. This year, Bond was able to add the \$40 million on top of the increased funding requested by the NSF for its normal research grants.

Officials will not say what is in next year's budget, which President Bill Clinton will unveil in February. But early indications are that he may propose no increase at all in the NSF research budget, leaving programmes to scramble for funds.



Bond: pulled off bid for extra \$40 million.

Some scientists also worry that Congress will drop the programme if it does not bear early fruit. "The commitment is only for one year," says Andrew Paterson, a plant geneticist at the Texas A&M University. "That is scary, because it is difficult to quickly make the kind of high-visibility findings which the Congress will recognize as a basis for giving us more support." Senate staff say this concern is misplaced, and that Bond is with the project for the long haul.

"We're talking about a major effort," says Clutter. "What the NSF is doing is jump-starting something that will set the stage for agriculture of the 21st century. But it isn't something that NSF will be doing for ever."

Other agencies, particularly the US Department of Agriculture, are expected to be involved in the initiative. A multi-agency task force, chaired by Ron Phillips, USDA's chief scientist, is completing a report on what their effort will look like.

The Senate has proposed an immediate injection of an extra \$780 million over five years into five important areas of agricultural research, of which plant genetics is one. This effort ran into trouble when the House of Representatives went into recess last month without passing a companion bill.

But there is a good chance that USDA funds will be made available for plant genome work. That would mollify those at the land grant colleges who do most USDA research and worry that they will be overlooked by the NSF.

Colin Macilwain

Greenwich observatory's fate hangs in the balance

[LONDON] The fate of the Royal Greenwich Observatory in Cambridge will be decided tomorrow (12 December) when Britain's main astronomy research funding agency decides whether to throw the centre a life-line or to carry out its original plan to close its research activities.

The Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) announced in July, after an intense debate, that it had decided to close the Cambridge site and merge some of its activities with those of the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh to create an Astronomy Technology Centre (see *Nature* **388**, 105; 1997). The £4 million (US\$7.2 million) annual savings will be used to support Britain's university astronomy sector.

But the decision to close the Cambridge centre after the merger has been fiercely opposed by the observatory's management, which has put together its own proposal to convert it into a private company. The managers believe they can use the observatory's world-famous name to sell its expertise in telescope design and instrumentation.

Under a business plan presented to PPARC, the observatory would remain in Cambridge, to which it moved less than ten years ago from its previous site at Herstmonceux Castle in Sussex, where it had been located since moving from its original site in London. Initially, half of its contract work would come from PPARC. The rest would be divided between different UK and, eventually, foreign government agencies.

Neil Parker, the observatory's assistant director, says the management is confident its plan makes financial sense, and will enable the observatory to continue as a research organization. But at the beginning of this week it remained clear that the decision will not be an easy one for PPARC.

When they meet tomorrow, members of PPARC's council will examine reports from separate committees that have examined the observatory management's proposals in detail. A committee of senior astronomers has reported on the proposed research plans. And the business plan has been reviewed by an internal audit committee, as well as by the accountancy company Touche Deloitte.

PPARC will not comment on the reports' conclusions. But the reports — and tomorrow's discussion — are almost certainly expected to address three important concerns. One is the question of start-up capital for the new company. The observatory is believed to have asked PPARC to provide £1 million to help pay salaries while order books remain thin. There is likely to be considerable debate as to whether the research



Fighting for life: observatory officials want to keep the Cambridge centre (above) open.

council can afford such a contribution.

The other concerns relate to the implications for PPARC, and for any contracts it funds, if the company proves unable to sustain itself, and to the implications for the University of Cambridge. The observatory's accommodation is owned by the research council on land leased by the university.

The university likes to maintain a distinction between academic facilities, based within the university, and private enterprise, based in the university's science park. It has not yet indicated whether it will allow a private observatory to continue operating from the university's 'academic' sector. In a recent statement, the vice-chancellor, Alec Broers, said the university was in no position to offer financial assistance to the observatory.

Relations between the university's Institute of Astronomy and the observatory have never been close — something Parker says the new company will try to remedy.

If PPARC were to refuse the observatory management's plans, it might revert to the 'fall-back position' of returning the observatory's name to its original home in Greenwich, now part of the National Maritime Museum (see *Nature* **388**, 705; 1997).

The museum's officials are known to be keen on this idea. They want to set up a centre for the public understanding of science. They believe that bringing the name back to Greenwich would boost public interest, particularly in the run up to the millennium.

But, as far as the observatory's managers are concerned, that is the least attractive option. They emphasize that the observatory is at the forefront of research in telescope instrumentation and design, and are tired of the constant references to its past. "The Royal Greenwich Observatory is not a museum," says Parker.

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