

# Alternative energy plan criticized

## WASHINGTON DC

Just weeks after President George W. Bush vowed to wean the United States off oil and onto alternative energy sources, scientists and policy analysts are voicing concern that the research push is unlikely to yield the promised benefits.

Their worries were highlighted last week by events at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) in Golden, Colorado, the Department of Energy's main research centre for energy sources such as solar, wind and ethanol. Just days after being laid off, 32 NREL staff were reinstated when it emerged that Bush was going to visit the lab during a tour to promote his focus on alternative energy.

During his tour of the lab on 21 February, Bush blamed poor communication for the oversight. "I recognize that there have been mixed signals when it comes to funding," Bush said. "Unfortunately, there are sometimes decisions made, but as a result of the appropriations process, the money may not end up where it was supposed to have gone."

Bush's 'advanced energy initiative' made its debut in his State of the Union address on 31 January, when he called for a 22% funding increase for research into alternative energy technology.

But budget analysts looking at the president's 2007 budget request say the proposed increase is more cautious, with funds moved into some research areas and removed from others. For instance, there is more money for research on solar energy, with a rise of 79% to \$148 million, and biomass, up 65% to \$150 million. But funding for energy conservation is down 6.3% to \$289 million, and the geothermal programme is axed altogether.

"The wider your view, the less glamorous it looks," says Kei Koizumi, a budget analyst at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "If you look just at biomass,



George W. Bush (right) toured the National Renewable Energy Laboratory to promote his policy on alternative energy sources such as wind power.

it looks great. If you look at all renewables, it looks less great."

Energy research, including work on fossil fuels, would

decline overall under the president's budget, says Koizumi. He adds that there is no money set aside for later years for the energy initiative.

Reaction elsewhere has been mixed. Solar enthusiasts are pleased with a budget increase for work on photovoltaic cells. Noah Kaye, spokesman for the Solar Energy Industries Association, called it "a key victory for a growing high-tech industry in the United States", but went on to call for production incentives such as tax breaks.

Proponents of wind energy sang the same tune, only with less enthusiasm. Their research boost is just 13% to \$44 million.

The president's call for increased funding got a mixed reception from environmentalists. The funds just aren't enough, they say, and are too focused on research. "We need other policies including technology incentives, or caps on emissions," says Andrew Aulisi, a senior associate at the Washington-based World Resources Institute. "You need lots of different policies to get a handle on the climate and

energy crisis. Even within R&D, the numbers are not that good."

To make matters worse, analysts point out that a large part of the increased money is likely to be taken up by earmarks, in which legislators appoint money to projects in their home states. For example, the NREL has blamed the lay-offs on the large number of earmarks in the 2006 budget, which it says left it with a \$28-million deficit in operating costs.

Earmarks are rare at agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. But they made up 21% of the energy research and development budget last year, which is the highest ever, according to Koizumi.

"The energy department has earmarks that they have no choice but to fund," adds George Douglas, a spokesman for the NREL. "It is taking away money that could be used in this type of research."

Most scientists would favour peer review as a way of distributing the energy department's research funds, says Marchant Wentworth, legislative representative for clean energy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "In the short term it does no good to have an on-again, off-again programme."

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