

Public 'must have more say on NIH spend'

[WASHINGTON] An expert panel told the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) this week that it should give the public a bigger voice in deciding how to spend its \$14 billion annual budget. The panel's suggestions include setting up public liaison offices in all 21 of its institutes, as well as in the office of the NIH director.

The panel also calls for more diverse public representation on the director's advisory committee, and a stronger role for the committee in setting research priorities. And it recommends the creation of a Director's Council of Public Representatives to bring public opinion to the director.

In its report published on Wednesday (8 July), a committee of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) calls on the NIH to introduce broad changes to the way it communicates with the public about research decisions. The agency "must revamp its approach to public input and outreach — at every level — without delay," writes the committee chairman, Leon Rosenberg, in the report. Rosenberg is a professor in the department of molecular biology at Princeton University.

"By creating formal links to the general public, NIH can ensure that all have a voice in what gets funded, and that more people understand how such decisions get made," he says. Such changes "would underscore that openness is as important to the process as expertise and objectivity".

The 120-page report, *Scientific Opportunities and Public Needs: Improving Priority Setting and Public Input at the National Institutes of Health*, was prepared by a 19-member committee that heard from researchers, NIH staff, disease advocacy groups and members of the public over five months.

It was mandated by Congress last year in a move reflecting the view of some members of Congress that the study would provide a needed line of defence for NIH against Congress's tendency to legislate on the details of research spending. They reasoned that the report could recommend changes in the way that NIH sets its priorities that would ultimately give less cause to Congress to meddle.

Disease advocacy groups have convinced other members of Congress that their causes need funding that is congressionally mandated because NIH's decision-making process is too closed.

The IOM report agrees that the NIH should consult a broader range of opinion: "NIH, especially the Office of the Director, does not have adequate channels through which the public can provide broad input into the NIH priority-setting process, or through which NIH can respond clearly to the public on issues of mutual concern."

The report "generally" endorses the criteria by which NIH allocates research dollars as

"reasonable and appropriate". But it recommends that the agency should develop data comparing the costs of specific diseases against the resources devoted to them.

NIH officials have told Congress that such data is highly complex and can be misleading, partly because basic research in one field can yield unexpected applications in others. But the panel says that NIH should come up with reliable figures anyway.

"We believe it can't be brushed aside," says Rosenberg. "If [the numbers] are done systematically and seriously, confidence will grow that this is a legitimate attempt."

The report recommends — as did an IOM study in 1984 — that the NIH director should have greater authority to control spending priorities throughout the agency, in part by requiring each institute to submit strategic plans annually. **Meredith Wadman**

Panel casts doubt on helium sell-off plan

[WASHINGTON] A plan to privatize a vast reserve of helium that the US government holds in an old natural gas dome under Texas may be impossible to implement, according to the chair of a National Research Council (NRC) panel. The panel is about to investigate the impact of the proposal on scientists and other users of the gas.

In October 1996, President Bill Clinton signed a law mandating the sale of the helium reserve, which holds 30 billion cubic feet of the gas at Amarillo, Texas. The legislation instructs the government to sell it between 2005 and 2015 at a price which, most analysts believe, the market cannot bear. It also requires the government to keep 600 million cubic feet, excluding the possible transfer of the whole reserve to a private company.

"This is going to be an interesting sale, because the whole thing isn't for sale," said Ray Beebe, the Tucson, Arizona-based consultant who co-chairs the NRC panel, at its first meeting on Monday (6 July). "Is the legislation a series of compromises, to the point where it might not be workable?" he asked.

The study was requested in the legislation as a concession to groups such as the American Physical Society, which believes that the government should keep the reserve for future

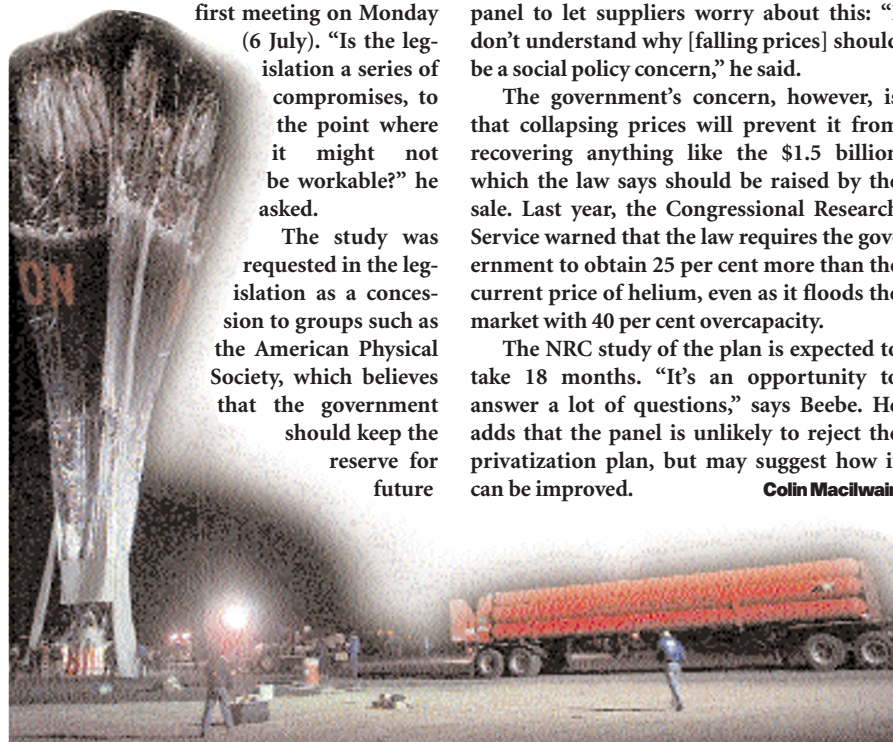
use. Physicists say they want to protect the reserve because of the extreme difficulty of extracting the gas from anywhere other than a few, non-renewable natural gas fields. "The physics community is aware of all sorts of technologies that could depend on helium," says Allen Goldman, a panel member and physicist at the University of Minnesota.

The United States produces three-quarters of the 4.5 billion cubic feet of helium that the world will consume this year. Available global reserves are estimated at 200 billion cubic feet. Use is growing rapidly, but the price of helium has been stable in recent years, at around \$35 per 1,000 cubic feet.

Apart from concern about consuming a non-renewable resource, critics worry that privatization of the reserve will flood the market, slashing prices and leading commercial suppliers to stop recovering helium from natural gas. But Tim Brennan, an economist at the University of Maryland, advised the panel to let suppliers worry about this: "I don't understand why [falling prices] should be a social policy concern," he said.

The government's concern, however, is that collapsing prices will prevent it from recovering anything like the \$1.5 billion which the law says should be raised by the sale. Last year, the Congressional Research Service warned that the law requires the government to obtain 25 per cent more than the current price of helium, even as it floods the market with 40 per cent overcapacity.

The NRC study of the plan is expected to take 18 months. "It's an opportunity to answer a lot of questions," says Beebe. He adds that the panel is unlikely to reject the privatization plan, but may suggest how it can be improved. **Colin Macilwain**



Balloon goes up: helium use is on the rise, but US privatization plan could flood the market.