

DoE budget scramble as closure plan axed

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Energy's delicately balanced, \$320 million budget for nuclear physics was thrown into turmoil last week, just as it was being presented to Congress, when energy secretary Bill Richardson revoked its plan to close down the Bates Linear Accelerator. This facility, built in 1968, is operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

According to a spokesman for MIT, Richardson called the institute's president, Chuck Vest, on 1 February, the day the budget was released, to inform him that its provision to close Bates at the end of this year was a mistake. The following day, Martha Krebs, assistant secretary for science at the Department of Energy (DoE), issued a statement saying that Bates would be funded after all. The department is expected to issue a budget amendment within the next month, saying where it will find the extra \$10 million needed to keep the facility open.

Ernest Moniz, a former director of the Bates accelerator, is now under-secretary for energy, but is said to have excluded himself from the decision.

MIT plans to use some of the money to complete the Bates Large Acceptance Toroid (BLAST) experiment, which will study the basic physics of magnetism in nuclei. "I'm delighted that we'll be able to continue the work," says Robert Redwine, director of MIT's nuclear science laboratory.

But the decision leaves DoE staff scrambling to find the money without hurting the rest of the nuclear physics programme. Last



Reprieved: the \$10m needed to keep the Bates accelerator open will have to be found elsewhere.

year, a sub-panel of the department's Nuclear Science Advisory Committee (NSAC) recommended that, unless more money became available for nuclear physics, Bates should be closed to allow funds to be diverted to more modern medium-energy physics facilities, primarily the Continuous Electron Beam Accelerator Facility (CEBAF) at Newport News, Virginia. In last week's budget, nuclear physics received an overall increase of just \$4.5 million, to \$343 million.

"We're going to work very hard to have it

not impact the rest of the nuclear physics budget," says Krebs. "We'd like to see MIT make a contribution as well."

Claus-Konrad Gelbke of Michigan State University, the chairman of NSAC, says he welcomes the news that Bates will stay open. "We never felt there was a scientific justification to close it," he says, adding that closure had only been recommended if no additional money was available. "I hope there will be an increase in the nuclear physics budget — if not, they are robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Pressure from Senator Edward Kennedy (Massachusetts, Democrat) and Congressman John Tierney (Massachusetts, Democrat) may have led to Richardson's decision. The congressmen were concerned about job losses at the facility, which employs 85 people.

Officials involved in reallocating the funds warned that it would be difficult to do so without upsetting the fine balance that currently exists between different elements of the department's budget, and that the money for Bates can only come from other science programmes.

Herman Grunder, the director of CEBAF, was not available to comment, but a spokeswoman said that he had been happy with the budget of \$73.7 million which the facility was promised, before the Bates reprieve. CEBAF's budget may be more secure than the \$118 million that the DoE pledged last week for the first year of full operations at the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York state.

Colin Macilwain

UK panel formed to rebuild trust in government science advice

[LONDON] The British government has formed a group of experts to provide it with advice on communicating risk, in a bid to restore public confidence in the ability of government to handle issues such as food safety. Public faith has been shattered in particular by the crisis over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

The 28-member group includes leading academics, journalists, heads of non-governmental organizations, and government officials. It includes Sir Robert May, the government's chief scientific adviser, Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, and Jon Snow, a prominent UK TV news presenter. Its deliberations will feed into a government seminar on risk management to be held in the coming weeks.

The group's creation coincides with the publication of a report from the UK Consumers' Association, which concludes that a science-based approach cannot alone be relied upon to reach socially acceptable decisions on issues involving the

communication of risk. The report, *Confronting Risk — A New Approach to Food Safety*, says: "Whilst science has an important role to play, it can only take us so far. It is important to recognize that scientific assessment itself is not a value or a judgement-free process. And even if it were, it is often surrounded by uncertainty."

The report concludes that the government needs to be more open and transparent in the way it manages risk, acknowledging scientific uncertainty, and involving as many relevant people — particularly from the public — as possible in the decision-making process.

It also recommends that meetings of scientific advisory committees should be held in public wherever possible, and that "minority scientific views" should be considered when picking experts to sit on these committees. The government is currently reviewing the structure and workings of its scientific advisory committees related to biotechnology.

A survey conducted last month by the polls company MORI revealed alarmingly low levels of public trust in government officials, including government scientists. Almost two-thirds of respondents "trusted most" independent university scientists and pressure groups — such as Greenpeace — to advise on the risks of pollution. Only 23 per cent trusted government scientists, and just 6 per cent ministers. Responses on the risks of BSE showed a similar pattern.

When asked to rate the government's handling of 13 issues, respondents placed genetically modified foods as the area handled least well. Modified foods topped the chart of issues where those polled felt that more legislation was required.

Sixteen per cent of respondents felt that they were well informed of the health risks of genetically modified foods, a similar proportion to those who felt informed about raw, unpasteurized milk. In contrast, 90 per cent felt well informed about the risks of smoking.

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