US aid to Russian weapons labs defended

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Energy (DoE) is fighting to protect its 'lab-to-lab' collaborations with weapons scientists in the former Soviet Union following a critical report from the General Accounting Office (GAO), an investigative arm of Congress.

The GAO report, published last month, argued that the Initiatives for Proliferation Program (IPP) is inefficient in getting money to scientists, and inadvertently supports work of military value to Russia (see *Nature* **397,** 643; 1999).

But Leonard Spector, director of the office of arms control and non-proliferation at the DoE, says the GAO's assertion that most of the $62 million spent on the IPP since 1994 has gone to the department's US laboratories is wrong.

He also rejects the GAO's contention that the department is failing to screen the projects adequately to ensure they are of no military use to Russia.

Despite this, the DoE has said that it is addressing other criticisms in the report. These include a tendency to continue to support projects with no realistic prospects of commercial success, and the consumption of much of the money allocated to scientists by Russian taxes and institute overheads.

The GAO report was requested by Senator Jesse Helms (Republican, North Carolina), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a long-time opponent of aid to Russia. It also argues that none of the 400 IPP projects has so far achieved "long-term commercial success".

After the release of the report, which attacted widespread news coverage, the DoE may face an uphill struggle to win the $30 million it has requested for the IPP in the 2000 financial year.

The programme began four years ago, evolving out of individual lab-to-lab activities initiated by scientists in the DoE nuclear weapons laboratories with their counterparts in the former Soviet Union.

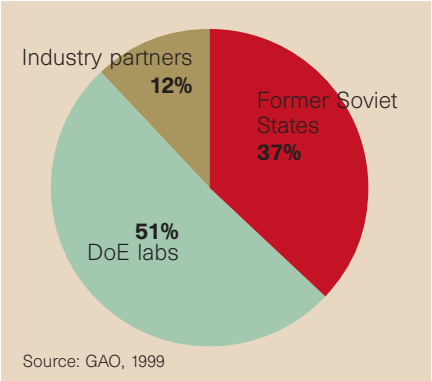
Eighty-four per cent of its projects are associated with institutes in Russia, the remainder involving Belarus, Kazakhstan or the Ukraine. Its aim is to keep former nuclear, chemical and biological weapons scientists gainfully employed, while improving their long-term economic prospects by developing commercially useful products.

The United States pays for the projects, supporting a principal investigator at one of its own laboratories and a co-principal investigator and research team at the former Soviet institute. It also pays 'administrative costs' to a US industrial partner that will oversee the commercial exploitation of the projects.

The GAO's strongest criticism was that most of the programme funds — 51 per cent during 1994–98 — were disbursed to DoE laboratories, with the target institutions receiving 37 per cent and the balance supporting the US industrial partners.

Spector says, however, that the GAO misattributed a large investment in telecommunications at the partner institutions to the DoE laboratories. "The [GAO] pie-chart is wrong, and the real split is about 50–50," he says. He added that the division was defensible, given that salary differences mean a US scientist costs about 20 times more to support than one in the former Soviet Union.

The DoE denies that it is helping Russia militarily — a charge the GAO backs up with examples mostly related to materials science. The report does say that laboratory officials told the GAO that "any improvement in materials" had potential military value. "We are very surprised with the charge that we are contributing to the Russian military capability, and we reject that," says Spector.



Economic divide: DoE denies GAO's claim that most funds for joint work end up in its own labs.

The report also expresses concern that scientists at some of the partner institutes have had links with countries the United States wants to isolate from Western military technology, such as Iran and Libya. But DoE officials point out that none of the institutes involved in the IPP were among those blacklisted by the US State Department last year in response to nuclear-proliferation concerns.

The officials admit that the commercialization of IPP projects has been difficult, although they say that four years is too short a time to assess their full potential.

A handful of IPP projects have moved into early commercial exploitation. Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, for example, is working with the Khlopin Radium Institute in St Petersburg on a pharmaceutical product that is already on sale in the city.

"It's not impossible" to make a commercial success of the projects, says Patricia Godoy-Kain, IPP programme manager at Pacific Northwest, which has recently embarked on a large number of IPP projects, mainly with partner institutes previously engaged in biological-warfare research.

The Congressional response to the report has been predictably mixed, with Democrats supporting the programme and some Republicans doubting its value. Helms said the programme's future would be threatened unless the findings were addressed.

Spector is optimistic. "I believe that the administration and the Congress are both very much behind this kind of interaction." He adds, however, "that there is room for improvement".

Colin Macilwain

Japanese institutes face greater autonomy

[TOKYO] **Prominent basic research institutes in Japan, such as the Institute of Space and Astronomical Sciences, appear likely to be added to the list of organizations due to be transformed into semi-autonomous 'agencies', with greater managerial independence.**

The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho) is considering whether the National Research Institutes for Joint University Use should be included in reform plans aimed at improving the nation's administration (see *Nature* 389, 897; 1997). These institutes provide facilities and equipment for domestic and international researchers.

The institutes — which include the High Energy Accelerator Research Organization and the National Institute of Genetics — would become semi-autonomous, alongside research institutes attached to science-related ministries, such as the National Institute for Environment Studies.

In proposing the move last month, the government said that the focus of these bodies on research showed that their role in university education was minimal, and that they were therefore equivalent to the national research institutes.

The plan, which is likely to be formally adopted next month, will give each institute its own management system and an external assessment body to review its performance. The new status will give the institutes greater flexibility in funding, for example by allowing them to carry over unspent research funds to the next fiscal year.

Concern had been raised over the plan's emphasis on financial performance, but these targets have been revised and would no longer apply to long-term basic research. Although the restructuring will include an accounting system comparable to that of private companies, it will not require cost-related performance from research institutes.

Asako Saegusa