

# Research agencies prepare to tighten budget belts

MAJOR cuts in the US science budget which could virtually eliminate any real growth in research funding over the next eighteen months are expected to result from President Carter's moves to reduce federal spending in an effort to lower the rate of inflation.

No cuts have yet been officially decided. But the President is expected to make public within the near future how he intends to move towards a balanced budget by eliminating about \$4 billion of federal expenditure in the current fiscal year by cutting back on commitments already made, and \$15 billion in the 1981 fiscal year which begins on 1 October by reducing the budget request to Congress.

Virtually the only area expected to emerge unscathed is the defence budget. And since the science budget is an area of discretionary expenditure — unlike social security, for example, where expenditure is mandated by law — it can expect to shoulder a fair part of the burden.

Research agency heads were asked last week by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) how they would meet given targets for reducing expenditure. Among the cuts under discussion are thought to be:

- National Institutes of Health: OMB has asked for cuts of \$170 million in the rest of the 1980 budget, and \$340 million (about 10% of the total) in the 1981 budget as part of a \$700 million reduction for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

One immediate casualty could be the administration's attempt to maintain the number of new competitive research grants at about 5000. This may be reduced to about 3,500, considerably raising the necessary quality of applications likely to be funded. There would also be a general cutback across the whole range of NIH's research activities, possibly resulting in the loss of some scientists' jobs.

- National Aeronautics and Space Administration: OMB is said to have asked NASA to prepare for cuts of \$760 million, a sum equivalent to 14% of the civilian space budget. This would affect almost all of the NASA's programmes, in particular the launch of the space shuttle.

Various planetary missions, such as the Galileo launch to Jupiter, and the solar-polar mission to be carried out jointly with the European Space Agency, would have to be put back, and perhaps even eliminated. The gamma ray observatory, recommended as a new start for 1981, may also be affected.

- National Science Foundation: cuts in the order of \$90 million to \$100 million — about 9% of the proposed 1981 budget — are under discussion with OMB. The budget office has suggested that where possible basic research expenditures should be protected. The main impact is therefore likely to fall on areas such as applied

science and science education.

- Department of Energy: several large-scale energy research projects have to be abandoned or cut back. Among those being closely studied last week in solar energy, for example, were the "power tower" under construction at Barstow in California, and the Ocean Thermal Test Facility (OTEC), now nearing completion off Hawaii.

- National Bureau of Standards: OMB has asked for cuts of about \$7 million, and bureau officials have indicated that at the top of their list is likely to be a new \$5 million initiative to enhance basic research in the agency, a package of eight proposals included in the original 1981 budget request with the specific endorsement of

the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Administration officials stressed last week that most of the potential cuts were still under negotiation. But President Carter warned state and city officials visiting the White House to expect some unpleasant surprises in the near future — and discussions were taking place last weekend to put together the final package.

If the cuts are made as expected, then they are unlikely to be strongly resisted by Congress, particularly in an election year when many voters will be looking for signs of financial stringency, and to oppose the cuts would be to oppose the President's anti-inflation strategy.

David Dickson

## Environment

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REASONS

*Lowland tropical rainforest destroyed by road building in the Amazon Basin.*

## World Conservation Strategy sets priorities for global resources

THE latest international environmental initiative was launched simultaneously last week in 32 countries, amid hopes that the time is ripe to stop squandering the Earth's natural resources. In producing its *World Conservation Strategy\**, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Wildlife Fund) has brought together a wide range of expertise to set out priorities for action to conserve and replenish global resources, from microbial cultures to tropical forests. The heaviest burden of such action would inevitably fall on developing nations, whose will may be impeccable, but whose means may be totally inadequate as the sponsors are bound to admit when they urge policy

makers to take up the strategy.

The major theme of the strategy — that conservation and development must go hand-in-hand has been gathering strength since the UN Conference on the Human Environment in June, 1972. Now the call is for governments and international agencies to base their development programmes on sustainable use of species and ecosystems, which means spending the interest while keeping the capital. The authors of the strategy cite familiar worldwide evidence that much of that capital is being dissipated. Many losses are due to overfishing in the oceans, overgrazing on the land, clearing of forests and destruction of wild animals and plants, often because people are too poor to replenish their resources, even if they take a long term view.

The way to reverse the trend is not by piece meal attempts to save resources once

\*Available from the World Wildlife Fund, 29 Creville Street, London EC1, £3.60; also available as a book, *How to save the World*, Kogan Page, £2.95 paperback, £5.95 hardback.