

30 and 50 per cent of NIH funds for animal-based research into the development of alternative testing methods.

Critics, such as the National Society for Medical Research, argue that the bill would give federal regulators "potentially catastrophic" powers and that scientists use alternative methods voluntarily when they are available. Feelings on both sides run high, however. NIH officials, previously cool to the demands of the animal welfare groups, seem now to be hoping that if they can bend with the wind, legislation will be avoided.

David Dickson

UK animal research

Legislation unlikely

British legislation on laboratory animals is hanging fire until the draft of a Council of Europe convention is agreed, supposedly in May. The government has said that new legislation will not be based on the amended version of the private member's bill first introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Halsbury last session and reintroduced this session. Members of the Lords committee that sat to amend that Halsbury bill now fear that further delays, due to tardiness in the Council of Europe or in drafting a new bill, could jeopardize agreement reached by opposing sides during the committee's deliberations.

The government hopes to avoid passing legislation clashing with the convention's aims. British legislation, however, is bound to be more stringent than the lowest common denominator between the Council's member states laid down in the convention. The latest available draft contains nothing that contradicts the Halsbury bill or that is likely to give the government's bill drafters pause.

Whether further amendments will cause problems remains to be seen. But the government's objections to the Halsbury bill are clearly on other grounds. During the second reading debate before Christmas, Lord Belstead for the government said that the bill leaves too much to the discretion of the Home Secretary and invests too many powers in an advisory committee that would be set up to review regularly ethical matters and the replacement and use of laboratory animals.

Lord Halsbury is far from content. He suspects that the main objections to his bill have come from Home Office inspectors who fear that an advisory committee, along the lines laid down in the bill, would disrupt their well-tryed methods of working. Despite government assurances that the original timetable still stands, Halsbury fears that delays in the Council of Europe could push it back. He plans to keep the issue alive by pushing his amended bill through the committee and report stages in the Lords in May even though it is now clear that it will never get a reading in the Commons.

Judy Redfearn

Commonwealth meeting

Food for reserves

Dacca

Moves to bolster the dangerously low level of world food stocks were the main outcome of a meeting of Commonwealth ministers for agricultural and rural development held in Dacca, Bangladesh, on 11-13 February. The ministers agreed that by mid-1981 negotiations should be completed to create a new International Grains Arrangement aimed at providing some of the 500,000 tons of cereals needed annually to replenish the International Emergency Food Reserve.

This was the first full-scale Commonwealth ministerial meeting of its kind, and was attended by 21 of the 44 member countries. The Commonwealth is made up of 20 nations showing a food deficit, and 21 with a surplus in food production. The remaining 3 nations, including host-nation Bangladesh, are on the verge of becoming self-sufficient.

The ministers urged quick action from international funding agencies, especially the World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, which are concentrating on aid to the poorest countries. Extra resources were called for to enable the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation to give more aid to developing Commonwealth countries.

M. Kabir

Romanian agriculture

Research expansion

President Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania called last month for greater research effort in agricultural sciences. He was addressing the 11,000 delegates at the Second Congress of Workers in Agriculture, including experts on agriculture as well as workers from cooperatives, collectives and the small residual private agricultural sector.

Although, according to Angelo Miculescu, the Minister of Agriculture, agricultural production went up by 26.4 per cent during the 1976-80 Five Year

Romanian workers — due for some changes



Plan, President Ceausescu had previously pointed out, at a working meeting on agriculture in January, that targets during the past five years had not been fulfilled, and that "resolute" measures would still be needed. Such measures, he has now told the congress, must include expansion of research on plant and animal genetics, soil quality and, for the economists, the logistics of a switch from the traditional farming structure of the countryside, to the development of agro-industrial complexes. The latter scheme, by which food-processing plants are located in the countryside, not only eliminates the need of transporting perishable foodstuffs to the cities for processing, but provides additional jobs to reduce the drift to the cities.

The new research priorities will be met from the present budget, apparently by switching funds from other sectors.

In all these changes, said President Ceausescu, the Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Bucharest must have an increased involvement both in planning and coordination. The Academy, and, indeed, the whole educational system, he continued, must train more agricultural specialists.

Higher education in the agricultural sciences, however, is not to be open to all. President Ceausescu says that only workers or former workers in agriculture may go to university to study agriculture. The practice by which a young city-dweller can go to an agricultural institute simply to qualify for a clerical job nominally connected with agriculture is to stop.

Similarly, agronomy centres where specialists are trained are to be reorganized. At present, future experts are trained at "picturesque" centres, whose sites are frequently chosen for reasons other than agricultural suitability. At one such centre near Bucharest, for example, experts are trained in handling tractors in hilly areas, although the centre itself is remarkably flat. The reason is simple, said the president. "Comrades from the Ministry of Agriculture" want the centre there, because it is a convenient place for them to go and make speeches.

Vera Rich