

Conflict of interest on California campus

Davis scientist steps away from grant

Washington

In a move that again reflects tensions between academic and commercial interests in biotechnology, a prominent plant geneticist at the University of California's Davis campus has agreed to step down from a multi-million dollar sponsored research contract financed by a large fertilizer company because of a potential conflict of interest with a private research company in which both he and the fertilizer manufacturer are also involved.

Dr Ray Valentine, internationally known for his research on the isolation of the *nif* genes present in plant-colonizing bacteria and responsible for the nitrogen-fixing properties of some plants, has also offered to resign from the university's Agricultural Experiment Station, where the sponsored research would be carried out. Although remaining on the faculty, where he is professor of plant biology, such a move would increase his responsibility for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and reduce his involvement with university research programmes.

Dr Valentine's offer to restrict his university-based research follows concerns raised by Dr Charles Hess, dean of the university's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, over the implications of a five-year, \$2.3 million research contract signed in July with Allied Chemical Corporation, for which Dr Valentine was to have been a principal investigator. The research under this contract would explore ways in which the bacterial genes discovered by Dr Valentine might be transferred to other plants to enable such plants fix their own nitrogen.

A few days after the deal with Allied Chemical Corporation was signed, the company announced that it had agreed to purchase a 20 per cent equity interest, at a cost of \$2 million, in a Davis-based company called Calgene which Dr Valentine had helped to set up and of which he is a vice-president.

On learning this news, Dr Hess told Dr Valentine that, as a result of concern among faculty members about potential conflicts of interest he would either have to withdraw from his involvement in the Allied Chemical grant to the university, or from Calgene. Dean Hess also announced that he was holding up the company's grant until an acceptable arrangement had been made.

Dean Hess has suggested two possible statements of principle which the faculty might use as a framework for establishing

outside contracts. One would be that individuals with appointments in the Agricultural Experiment Station "shall not accept gifts, grants or research contracts with private firms in which they have an equity interest or serve as a consultant" — a condition that would have applied to Dr Valentine's case. Dean Hess has also suggested that such individuals "shall not have an equity interest in private firms whose research programs are the same as the individual's Experiment Station research programme".

Emphasizing his complete confidence in the integrity of Dr Valentine, Dean Hess said that as the college and experimental station were funded primarily from public sources there was also concern about "whether these apparent conflicts of interest might jeopardize the support that we get from tax funds if people began to feel that the return from the research was being realized by private investors".

Calgene officials for their part have

denied that there would necessarily be a conflict of interest. Although major funding has been received from Allied Chemical, they insist that their main research interest will be on how to improve the efficiency of fertilizers, rather than looking at plants themselves, as researchers at the experiment station will be doing.

Faculty members at Davis will meet next month to discuss Dean Hess's proposals. Meanwhile Dr Valentine's future relationship with the university remains uncertain. Dean Hess says that he intends to "discuss" Dr Valentine's offer to resign from the experiment station completely rather than just withdraw from the Allied Chemical project. The university is keen to avoid any public criticism about conflicts of interest. At the same time, it is reluctant to put off potential corporate sponsors of its research which are becoming an increasingly important source of funding as federal and state financing for research begins to contract. **David Dickson**

Technology assessment wins new friends

Washington

Two years off its tenth birthday, the United States Congress's Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) at last seems to be coming of age. By adopting a more pragmatic outlook OTA has generated a political and scientific credibility that makes its prospects more secure than ever before.

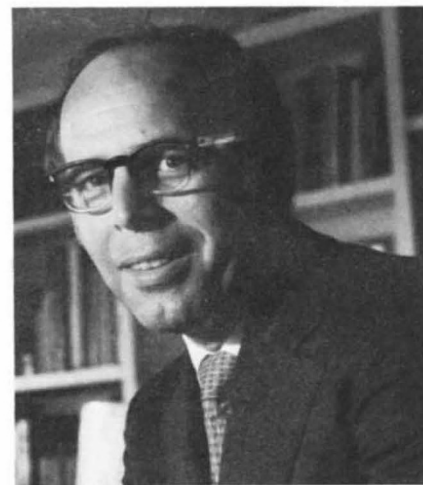
The change has its critics. "OTA is turning out good craft pieces that serve the interests of clients, but there is still a latent demand for something which is more policy- and futures-rich" says Dr Joseph Coates, who was among the original staff members and recently left to establish his own consultancy firm.

But evidence of the new-found stability, which broadly coincides with the reign of OTA's present director, Dr John Gibbons, previously head of the Energy, Environment and Resources Center at the University of Tennessee, was shown last week by the willingness of a Republican-dominated Senate, in a time of reduced federal spending, to increase the OTA's budget by 7.5 per cent next year to \$12 million. Even though this will barely allow OTA to keep up with inflation, it compares with the budget to which the office has been held between 1980 and 1981.

When OTA was established by Congress in 1972, finally coming into being in November 1973, many saw it — with some justification — as a vehicle through which Democrat legislators hoped to challenge the scientific and technical decisions of the Nixon Administration following the demise of the Office of Science and Technology and the President's Science Advisory Committee.

OTA's new-found friends, however,

include conservative Republicans such as Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada. Senator Laxalt is said to have been impressed by a recent study carried out by OTA comparing different basing modes for the MX missile which point out the advantages and drawbacks of each without endorsing a



Dr John Gibbons — forging links

particular design, issues directly pertinent to the debate about placing the missiles in his home state.

The importance of such friends emerged two weeks ago, when they helped to head off an attempt by Senator Mack Mattingly, chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee responsible for legislative affairs, to kill future funding for the OTA on the grounds that its studies duplicate the work of other bodies such as the Congressional Research Service.

It was a charge that was strongly denied by Dr Gibbons in hearings on the OTA