UN environment programme threatened

Officials urge withdrawal of US support

Washington

The future of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has been placed in jeopardy by the decision of top officials in the US State Department to recommend withdrawal of all US funds for the programme from the beginning of October. Environmentalist groups and others are lobbying hard to prevent the State Department from officially endorsing this position, since the $10 million which the United States contributes annually to UNEP is about a third of its total budget.

The budget cuts are a direct result of President Reagan's decision three weeks ago to demand an immediate across-the-board cut of 12 per cent in so-called discretionary spending for all federal agencies.

A resolution passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate at the end of October — the stop-gap measure needed to ensure that government departments continue operating even though their budgets for the fiscal year 1982, which starts on 1 October 1981, have not yet been agreed to — contained a 12 per cent cut in the $215 million allocated for voluntary contributions to international funds by the State Department. Documents apparently drafted by officials of the Office of International Organizations recommend that, rather than distribute these cuts across all agencies funded out of this budget category, the reductions should be made by completely eliminating contributions to particular funds.

Among those recommended for elimination is the $7.5 million which was to have contributed to the Interim Fund for Science and Technology, set up following the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development in Vienna in 1979. There seems little likelihood that this contribution will be rescued, partly because there is no significant constituency in Washington lobbying for the Interim Fund. The outlook is equally bleak for two other contributions, one for a Trust for South Africa, the other to support UN activities in Namibia.

The proposal to cut UNEP funding could run into stiffer opposition. Representative Don Bonker, chairman of the human rights and international organizations subcommittee of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, has already written a letter of protest to Mr Elliot Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, and is to meet Mr Abrams this week. One of the points which Mr Bonker is expected to make is that a move which could eventually lead to the dismemberment of UNEP as an independent agency could have repercussions for the United States not only in its relations with other industrialized nations, such as Sweden, which support the programme, but also with developing nations. UNEP, based in Nairobi, Kenya, is the only UN agency to have its headquarters in a Third World country.

David Dickson

Patents to mean slow publication?

Washington

The fear that merely submitting a manuscript to a scientific journal for possible publication could jeopardize the chance of obtaining subsequent patent protection in some European countries has prompted four US federal agencies to require notification of any potentially patentable research results at least three months before they are submitted for publication.

This rule is the result of a circular issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in July suggesting how it might apply the terms of a new patent law, covering federally sponsored research carried out in universities and small businesses, passed by Congress at the end of last year. The rule has already been adopted by the Department of Energy, the Department of Defense, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The proposed rule has already created a storm of protest from the US research community, which claims that, by threatening to deny a scientist patent rights to a discovery if the procedure is not followed, it could seriously impede scientific communication.

In its final form, to be issued by OMB before the end of the year, the bill is likely to be at best a compromise between scientists who feel that they should be free to try to get a scientific discovery into print as soon as possible, and federal administrators who fear that excessive zeal to publish could jeopardize foreign patent rights.

The July circular from OMB says that all federal agencies will have the option of requiring those scientists they support to notify the agency of patentable reserch three months before a manuscript is submitted for publication in a professional journal. According to OMB's Office of Federal Procurement Policy, agencies favouring this requirement feel that it is necessary to assure protection of foreign patent rights, particularly when national security interests are involved. But the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have already indicated that they have no intention of exercising this option, leaving scientists to inform their funding agencies of results at the same time as they submit them for publication.

Dr Howard W. Bremer, patent counsel for the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation — one of the most successful university-based licensing groups in the United States — claimed that the OMB statement that merely submitting research findings to a scientific journal represented a form of disclosure that could act as a statutory bar in some European countries to later patenting was "wholly without foundation".

Mr James Denny, assistant counsel for patents at the Department of Energy and chairman of the interagency group responsible for drawing up the proposed regulations, disagrees. The problem would not apply in the United States, where a patent can be applied for up to one year after publication of research results, but under the new patent rules introduced by the European Economic Community, scientists might be unwittingly forfeiting their chances of a European patent.

At NIH, plans are already being drawn up to implement the government's new patent policy, which is essentially an extension to all universities and small businesses of the Institutional Patent Agreements which individual agencies such as NIH and NSF had previously negotiated with a limited number of research universities.

There are other worries resulting from the new patent laws. Several members of a subcommittee of the Advisory Committee to the Director of NIH, looking at co-operative research relationships with industry, have expressed concern about the condition proposed by OMB that for research jointly funded by the federal government and a private sponsor, the patent should remain the property of the government, however small its contribution to the research.

If rigidly interpreted this might scare off potential corporate supporters, but OMB's associate administrator Mr Fred Dietrich says that the provision would be invoked only where their had been a clear transfer of potentially patentable ideas, for example from a scientist working on the federally sponsored part of a project to one working on the corporate-sponsored part. All of which suggests that researchers will certainly have to keep meticulously detailed records of who paid for the various aspects of their work.

As a result of the new patent law, NIH will in future require anyone receiving a grant to sign an agreement stating that one

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of the conditions of the award is that the agency be informed promptly if any potentially patentable results emerge from the research. **David Dickson**

EEC science policy

Grand Plan to flop?

Brussels

The European Commission is preparing a grand strategy on the European Community's research policy for the 1980s which is to be the basis of a Council of Science Ministers on 9 November .

The policy paper, which is still undergoing revisions, has been put together under the direction of Viscount Etienne Davignon, the European Commissioner who has the main responsibility for scientific affairs in Gaston Thorn's Commission. Davignon has chosen to continue with the basic priorities that have been the staple diet of past community policies: energy research, particularly fusion and nuclear safety, environmental protection, raw materials and the coordination of indirect action programmes.

There are some changes though. Davignon wants to bring together under his direction all of the Community's research and development programmes, including agricultural research, research and development for the use of developing countries and data processing. Some see these proposals as examples of Davignon's ambition, but he seems more concerned with creating more efficient administration.

Davignon intends to do away with many of the advisory and expert committees which clutter up the decision-making process. But to achieve greater flexibility in decision-making, Davignon suggests that the Council of Ministers should set up a standing committee.

The council in November will consider fixing the Community's research activities up to 1986. To this end, Davignon suggests a budget which would progressively increase by 2 per cent a year. This is well below the inflation rate in any of the ten member countries and thus represents a decrease in expenditure; however, it bears comparison with expected increases in national research budgets.

Davignon will be pushing for increased expenditure in a few fields. He would like more spent on nuclear fission research and industrial innovation. In this he has the support of the two other commissioners involved, the German Karl-Heinz Narjes with responsibilities for industrial innovation and nuclear safety, and the Englishman Ivor Richard who has responsibilities for education and social affairs. Davignon is especially keen for the Commission to take a lead in promoting nuclear safety research in areas not covered by national programmes. The aim would also be to lessen public mistrust of nuclear power.

The French, having taken a decision to go ahead with the old regime's nuclear power programme and increase the entire national research budget, will probably support the new plans. The rest of the Community is doing its utmost to reduce public expenditure in all fields. There are strong signs that some governments regard community research as a luxury — for example, the Dutch want to reduce their direct contribution to the EEC research centre at Petten. **Jasper Becker**

Energy in France

Small change

President Mitterrand's honeymoon is over. His government won the vote in the National Assembly last week for a large nuclear power programme (six new reactors to be begun in the next two years), but only at the cost of opening up divisions in the Socialist Party and calling into question its electoral promise of "a new politics" of energy.

M. Paul Quilès, socialist deputy for Paris and author of the party's electoral energy report, has been trounced; and a member of ex-President Gisacard's party described the new energy policy as similar to Giscard's — only with less courage.

On just one point, M. Quilès won a concession: the restarting of construction at the reactor sites where work was "frozen" a few months ago, pending the definition of government policy. Before these sites are reopened, local authorities will be consulted.

However, the affected local authorities — at Cattenom, Golfech, Chooz, Civaux and Le Pellerin — will have to move fast. They have less than a month to say yes. If they say no, the decision will move up to the regional assembly concerned. If, within the same month, this assembly cannot agree or choose a new local site, the decision reverts to parliament and government — which then have to decide if the construction is in the essential national interest. If it is, the reactor goes ahead regardless.

There are other differences between the Giscard and Mitterrand plans. Giscard wanted to start eight reactors at 1,300 MW

UK universities redundancy plans

As the vice-chancellors of British universities struggle to draw up a national redundancy scheme for academics, more universities are estimating the number of posts that will have to go over the next three years. Many hope that economies for the current year can be made by cutting recurrent expenditure, by voluntary redundancy and by early retirement schemes. They plan to stave off compulsory redundancies until 1982–83. Others do not enjoy that luxury.

The universities of Stirling and Aston in Birmingham, for example, both among the most severely penalized, expect to move quickly. Stirling's problems are complicated by the low average age of its academics, which means that there are few candidates for early retirement Among the less heavily cut, however, there are also some surprises. The University of Bristol, for example, says it must lose 400 posts over three years, 150 of which it have to be met by compulsory redundancy.

The vice-chancellors' plan to draw up national guidelines for compulsory redundancy is hampered by the large variety of contracts of employment for academics. They hope to have more concrete proposals after their next committee meeting at the end of the month. But any plan will not be welcomed by the Association of University Teachers (AUT), the academic trade union, which does not acknowledge the need for compulsory redundancy. AUT is prepared to fight cases in the courts as soon as they arise, saying that it will contest decisions to sack academics even before individuals have been named. In that case, arguments will rest on independent assessments of a university's finances and the conditions of employment for academics laid down in its charter.

The accompanying table gives the number of full-time equivalent jobs that the universities estimate will have to be lost over the next three years. Some estimates are firmer than others, but few at this stage show how many posts can be lost voluntarily. **Judy Redfearn**

Estimates of full-time post losses at selected universities

University	*Academic*	*Non-academic*	*Total no. of existing posts*
Bristol	259	141	3,500
Hull	110	100	2,000
Sussex	78	157	1,272
Aberdeen	300–350*	*	2,696
City	60 (314)	90	552†
Aston	150 (600)	300	2,000
Stirling	60 (260)	120	1,100
Salford	200	300	1,500
Bradford	150–180 (495)	—	—
Exeter	70 (500)	—	1,900

Figures in parentheses give the current number of academics.
*Includes both academic and non-academic posts.
†Academic, clerical and technical posts.

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