

Nuclear Corporation (which would build the reactor) and the Central Electricity Generating Board (which would buy it) are now putting their heads together to see how the French do it — and whether the British price might be brought down. The generating board intends to announce its final estimate of the cost of the station, and the price of the electricity that it will produce, at the end of February.

Robert Walgate

Interferon used at last

The Medical Research Council's Common Cold Unit in Salisbury, England, has resumed its trials of interferon as a preventative of rhinovirus infection — one of the causes of the common cold.

Ten years ago, the centre proved the effectiveness of leukocyte interferon, prepared from human blood by Dr Kari Cantell in Finland, against rhinovirus — but abandoned further work because of the high cost of the material. Trials have been resumed in the belief that genetically engineered interferon will

"TAKE THREE TIMES A YEAR,
AFTER WAGE
INCREASES"



eventually be so cheap that interferon might one day be used to prevent coughs and sniffles.

The resumed trials utilize interferon which is much purer than before. It is obtained either from white blood cells or from genetically engineered bacteria. Both forms are effective at high dosage and the next step at Salisbury will be to test how far the dosage of interferon can be reduced and how late in the course of infection it can be administered. Then it will be up to the manufacturers to reduce prices to the level of common palliatives such as aspirin — a tall order, no doubt, but one which may eventually be met. The aim is to do better than the Soviets who currently sell, for about \$1 a time, interferon of such low dosage as to be useless.

Robert Walgate

US research spending

Problems in public

Washington

Efforts by the Reagan Administration to shift significant responsibility for research from the public to the private sector have produced a new crisis of identity in some national laboratories funded by the US Department of Energy.

Established in the early 1950s largely as a means of supporting the research needed for both the military and the civilian uses of nuclear energy, the laboratories expanded the scope of their activities considerably in the 1970s as they were given additional responsibilities.

Many of the areas of expansion, however, such as solar energy and conservation, are precisely those whose research budget is being most heavily cut by the Reagan Administration. Furthermore, some powerful Republicans are questioning whether it is appropriate for the government to be involved at all in areas which, they claim, should properly be left to the private sector.

Budget figures alone tell a significant part of the story. For the twelve "multi-programme" laboratories run by independent contractors for the Department of Energy, the total budget for the current fiscal year is \$2,803 million, \$60 million less than for 1981.

Given an expected inflation rate of about 10 per cent, the result will be a significant reduction in overall effort. The reductions, however, will not be shared equally, with the two major weapons laboratories, Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, receiving budget increases of 11 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.

Laboratories hit harder by cuts include Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago, with a budget reduction of more than 25 per cent, while a reduction of similar magnitude has been absorbed at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tennessee. In both instances, the major decreases are in programmes of research into fossil energy, conservation technologies and "other energy supplies".

A decision last year by the Department of Energy, in light of its expected budget cuts, to decrease the energy-related programmes by 10 per cent from 1980 levels, has already markedly affected staffing. Some laboratories have been able to absorb most of the technical and scientific staff who have been displaced in weapons-related projects; at Oak Ridge, for example, many have moved to nuclear-warhead production. Others have not been so lucky. Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island has already had to lay off 270 out of its total of 3,600 staff. At Argonne, the reduction so far has been 600 out of about 4,400.

The prospects for next year do not look much better. Although precise budget

proposals will not be known until they are presented to Congress by President Reagan on 8 February, it is widely expected that the Administration will suggest similar reductions for 1983; after that, the laboratories can expect level funding at best for the next three to five years.

A significant change in policy direction was already indicated in a memorandum last May to laboratory directors from Acting Under-Secretary of Energy, Dr Raymond Romatowski. Under this regime, Dr Romatowski said that in principle the multi-programme laboratories should be restricted to two main functions. The first was to conduct basic and applied research comprising important "technology-base" activities that the private sector is ill-equipped or not motivated to pursue; the second was to undertake development work in promising areas "beyond the private sector's capability and interest".

Several review committees are now looking at how to put these two principles into practice. The main review, being carried out by the Office of Science and Technology Policy, will take some time to complete. In the shorter term, a panel of the Department of Energy's Energy Research Advisory Board has been asked by the Deputy Energy Secretary, Mr W. Kenneth Davis, to carry out its own review of the multi-programme laboratories, and a final report is due by September.

Meeting in Washington last week, the members of the advisory board panel agreed to offer various strategies as possible options for action in their interim report, due at the beginning of March.

In the course of preparing its full report, the panel will be looking at the experience of other countries in running government laboratories to see if they may provide a model for new institutional arrangements in the United States.

Whatever proposals are finally accepted by the Administration, attempts significantly to change the current status of the laboratories is guaranteed to meet an uphill struggle in Congress, where many have powerful political supporters.

David Dickson

EEC research and development

Time for success

Brussels

Vicomte Etienne Davignon, European Commissioner for Research and Development in Brussels, set a rather quiet meeting on the evaluation of Community research and development on Monday with a sharp attack on previous Community policies. There is a "great deal of scepticism" about Brussels-sponsored research and development, he said, and it was time for some successes.

Davignon singled out the seven-year gestation of the bioengineering programme, recently agreed at the Council of Ministers, as an example. "We came out