

## US employment

## Argonne's new ways with people

## Washington

Argonne National Laboratory has repeatedly evaded limits on the numbers of staff employed by referring applicants to intermediary companies known as "body shops", which supplied Argonne with "resident consultants" in exchange for overhead payments as high as 184 per cent.

This practice was one of several management irregularities at Department of Energy (DoE) laboratories revealed last week by the Senate's permanent subcommittee on investigations. The laboratories, which are largely exempt from the normal federal contract procedures, have been the subject of a year-long investigation by the subcommittee and Congress's General Accounting Office (GAO).

The use of the "body shops" appears to be the most serious abuse unearthed by the subcommittee. In one typical case, an applicant was told that she could not be employed by Argonne because of a freeze on engaging new staff but that she would instead be offered a job by an intermediary company. Her salary was \$10.34 per hour; the company was paid \$25.54 per hour for her services. After working as a "residential consultant" at Argonne for a year, she was taken on by the laboratory directly. She continued to do exactly the same work, and received slightly less than the \$10.34 per hour she had been making as a resident consultant.

GAO found that one division at Argonne had spent \$7.2 million for resident consultants since 1977, of which overhead charges by the "body shops" accounted for \$4 million.

The practice of hiring professional employees through intermediaries was also popular in Argonne's Washington office. In questioning GAO Comptroller General Charles Bowsher at the subcommittee hearings last week, Senator William Roth (Republican, Delaware) brought out the fact that the Washington office had hired a nuclear engineer through Kelly Girl, a temporary office-help agency. A similar arrangement was made through the Washington School for Secretaries, which runs a temporary service. A subcommittee staff member said that "five or six" professionals had been hired this way; according to GAO, Argonne could have saved \$45,000 by hiring these employees directly and avoiding the agencies' commissions of up to 50 per cent.

Argonne appears to have used the body shops not only to avoid hiring limits but also to circumvent its own education requirements. Senate investigators found several resident consultants who did not meet the laboratory's graduate-degree requirements but who had been referred to body shops by the laboratory and hired by them, usually to continue work at Argonne that they had begun as undergraduates in

Argonne's student programme.

The acting under-secretary of DoE, Jan Mares, offered a mild defence of the use of body shops before the subcommittee: "managers of these laboratories need the flexibility to hire temporary people", he said, especially in the face of annual budget uncertainties and fluctuations.

Argonne's official response to the GAO study points out that the resident consultants were needed particularly at a time when Argonne was being asked to shift quickly from a concentration on nuclear energy to a much broader coverage of energy research and development. Argonne says there are now fewer than 15 resident consultants — in 1980 there were 200.

The need for flexibility was also the issue in another area, the awarding of contracts without competitive bidding. The national laboratories are allowed considerable leeway here — with the result, as GAO reported earlier this year, that for example 72 per cent of Argonne's contracts were let without bidding. At Oak Ridge National Laboratory, GAO found several instances in which the company selected by the laboratory was informed of the laboratory's budget for the project. The company's proposed costs for the project tended to show a remarkable agreement with the amount budgeted.

The laboratories' exemption from the usual federal and DoE contracting procedures led to other abuses. DoE headquarters discovered that by going through the laboratories, it could avoid those regulations in awarding its own contracts. A contract official at Brookhaven National Laboratory, for instance, was directed by DoE to award \$15,000 to a particular filmmaker for production of an informational film unrelated to any work then going on at Brookhaven. The project collapsed six months later when the film-maker proved "incapable of performance", according to the Senate subcommittee staff. It also turned out, said the staff, that the film-maker's "only unique qualifications were that he was in the film business and has attended graduate school with a lab employee whose office was involved in the project".

The Senate investigators said that under these "directed procurements", the laboratory officials nominally in charge of awarding contracts and overseeing performance were in fact used simply as conduits for DoE, and often did not even see any of the work.

DoE last autumn issued an order for this practice to stop. But it is still permitted when the contract is directly related to the laboratory's technical mission. DoE officials told the Senate investigators that the procedure was sometimes necessary in order to cut through the red tape of the

standard procurement channels.

Senator Roth emphasized that he appreciated the special mission of the laboratories and their need for flexibility. But he said there is "no assurance that money is well spent" without better safeguards. And he seemed less than satisfied by DoE assurances that the problem of directed procurements had been solved by last year's order. "The oldest game in town is to issue some instruction to satisfy some senator", he said. **Stephen Budiansky**

## Anthrax island

## Why worry?

How do you get rid of anthrax? The announcement last week in the House of Commons that the British Ministry of Defence intends to try and clean up Gruinard Island has left several people puzzled. The island, off the north-west coast of Scotland, is contaminated with *Bacillus anthracis* spores scattered during biological warfare tests carried out during the Second World War. The ministry will use laboratory-tested chemicals in the field trial which will begin next month. What these chemicals are and why such an operation is now called for are not at all clear.

Gruinard Island is in a popular tourist area, but has been out of bounds to man and animals for nearly 40 years. Scientists from the Chemical Defence Establishment at Porton Down have been testing soil



samples and trying to find an effective decontaminant for many years. A survey in 1979 showed that viable spores of *Bacillus anthracis* lay in the top 6 cm of soil and were mainly concentrated in a small area in the southern end of the island.

The Ministry of Defence revealed its intention to carry out field trials in response to a question in the Commons by Mr Donald Stewart, MP for the Western Isles, who asked how much longer the island would be ruled unsafe for men and animals. The ministry plans to put a small party from the Chemical Defence Establishment onto the island to test the effectiveness of certain chemicals in destroying the anthrax spores. The ministry will not give any details of the chemicals in question. A representative of the Scottish Home and Health Department will accompany the scientists.

In spite of warning notices, tourists frequently stray onto Gruinard Island. In a recent incident a German and a Belgian on