

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

a fishing trip were apparently unable to understand the hazard warnings and wandered onto the island. *Bacillus anthracis* is particularly dangerous to humans when inhaled into the lungs — a low risk on Gruinard because the spores are buried in the soil. It can also enter the body through the gut or through cuts on the skin, when it causes spreading sores.

Officially *Bacillus anthracis* is described as a hypervirulent micro-organism which is difficult to destroy. In laboratory conditions it is susceptible to heat. Peracetic acid can also destroy anthrax spores but the acid must itself be carefully handled.

One knowledgeable person confessed himself perplexed as to why the Ministry of Defence is making such a fuss about the island. The strain of anthrax on Gruinard is not as virulent as some field strains and infection is easily treated with antibiotics. Animals can be vaccinated against the disease and in many areas, where the climate is less favourable, anthrax has been successfully eradicated through animal vaccination programmes. Gruinard Island, he said, poses no serious threat to humans. In the past anthrax has been found in animal bonemeal feed and its presence ignored.

Jane Wynn

UK research councils

Sharing of spoils

One of the long-standing sources of jealousy among British scientists is likely to be stirred up by the decision announced last week to mount an inquiry into the ways in which research councils distribute their resources between in-house research and support for universities. The Advisory Board for the Research Councils has set up a committee under Mr J.R.S. Morris, chairman of the British subsidiary of the oil-drilling company Brown and Root, to make recommendations on the subject early in 1983.

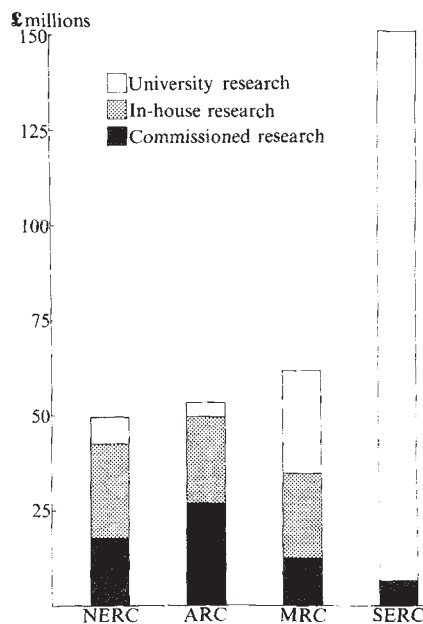
The committee is a swift response to one of the more contentious recommendations of the Merrison report on university research, published last month (see *Nature* 10 June, p.445). The report said that when research councils are under pressure, "university support may be the only or chief area" in which they can economize. In a judicious but ominous phrase, the report went on to say "we are not satisfied" that the balance between in-house spending and university support "is always right".

The committee also pointed out that during the 1970s, when government support for the research councils increased by 8 per cent in real terms, the councils' collective support for university research increased by only 3 per cent. This comparison may, however, be misleading because of the importance of salary and equipment costs in in-house budgets and research grants respectively.

Even so, some research council employees see the setting up of the new committee as an attempt by the academic scientists who account for the majority of members of the advisory board to increase the funds available for university research. Others ruefully recall that in the 1960s, the Agricultural Research Council, relatively and absolutely the most modest supporter of university research, was, on account of its dependence on in-house research, the target of the complaints that led to the Rothschild reorganization of civil science.

In practice, the new committee will have to solve several awkward problems, not least that of deciding how to assess the present performance of the research councils. The accompanying chart, based on figures taken from the Merrison report, shows the use made of resources in 1978-79 by the four research councils supporting research in the natural sciences. The cost of commissioned research is that commissioned by government departments from the research councils under the Rothschild customer-contractor principle.

The pattern of spending by the Science



Research council spending, 1978-79. Spending by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), Medical Research Council (MRC) and Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC). Source: Cmnd 8567, HMSO.

and Engineering Research Council is anomalous in that, of the £144 million claimed as university support in 1978-79, only £51 million was spent directly in universities, with the remainder divided almost equally between service laboratories and subscriptions to international projects.

For the committee (which will have met for the first time this Wednesday, 4 August), the most difficult task will be to establish criteria for deciding how the "right" balance between in-house research and university support should be struck. The chairman of the committee is thought to be impartial in the sense of being as impatient with the research councils as with academics.

Telecommunications

Battle hots up

Mercury, the private telecommunications network licensed last year in Britain to compete with British Telecom, the still-public network, is about to take off rather sooner than expected. Its founders (Cable and Wireless, British Petroleum and Barclays Bank) have brought forward to next spring the launch of a service in London, intended as the first element in a more extensive network.

Mercury says that demand from potential customers is the chief reason why its plans have been advanced, but there seems no doubt that the competitiveness of British Telecom is another. At the outset, Mercury hopes to gain some advantage because it will be offering high-speed digital transmission services, available from British Telecom only in the City of London. The plan is to do for Birmingham by next May what will have been done in London a little earlier, when the two cities will be linked by microwave. These two services are the first elements in what Mercury misleadingly calls a national network. The present goal (for 1984) is a figure-of-eight network linking only the major commercial cities in central England. Initially transmission within cities will be by microwave radio.

Initially, Mercury will be suitable only for customers wishing to send voice and data down leased lines at 64 kilobits or 2 megabits a second. Charges will be based on standard rates per channel, independent of distance. The basic network is expected to cost about £50 million, but the capital cost of providing a network to compete with British Telecom's will be far more. Investment of £1,000 million over 25 years has been mentioned to pay for, among other services, switching and possibly a link with British Telecom.

But plans for the future will depend on customer demand. Mercury is in touch with 25 potential customers for its London service, and government departments as well as large companies are said to be showing interest. Mercury believes that its chief attraction over British Telecom's digital service in London will be its transatlantic satellite-link. At one stage, plans for international links had seemed doomed to be obstructed by British Telecom which, as the signatory to Intelsat, is the recognized international carrier. But Mercury, which will be negotiating directly with Intelsat to carry traffic late next year from London, is unperturbed that British Telecom must sign the contract, seeing British Telecom's involvement as purely administrative.

How successful Mercury is in attracting its statutory allowance of 3 per cent of British Telecom's business by 1985 will also depend on the competition. The consensus is that the monopoly is putting the lead on.

Judy Redfearn