

US agricultural research

Worry over research grants

Washington

A SHAKE-UP at the competitive grants office of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has raised new concern about the future of the programme which provides \$16 million a year for peer-reviewed research proposals in basic agricultural science.

Under the reorganization now taking place, Dr Holly Schauer, the associate chief of the programme who is widely viewed as a strong advocate of its scientific and budgetary integrity, has been forced out, and several largely administrative offices are being combined with the competitive grants office under a new director, to be named shortly. The addition of new administrative duties to the director's job raises the possibility that the job may go to a USDA career bureaucrat, rather than an academic researcher, as has been customary. The directors have until now served for one year. There is growing speculation that the job may go to Dr Clarence Grogan, a USDA career official who has served as acting director of the office since last fall.

These changes have supporters of the programme sitting on the edges of their seats. Since the establishment of the programme in 1978, it has come under constant attack. Opposition has been particularly intense from the land-grant colleges, which receive automatic funding under a state-by-state allocation formula dating back to 1887. Although the competitive grants programme has never had more than a small fraction of the funds that go to the land-grant colleges (about \$150 million), it has been seen as a constant threat.

Unlike the formula funds, the competitive grants are open to all comers — notably researchers at non-land-grant institutions such as Harvard and Stanford universities — and are scrutinized by peer-review panels.

According to Dr Ed Kendrick of USDA, the director of the new office will deal mainly with administrative matters. Advertisements for the position specify a bachelor's degree at least; Kendrick says the major qualifications will be scientific background, scientific understanding, credibility in the scientific community and management skills.

Answering criticisms that this would lower the credibility of the programme and weaken its links with the scientific community, Kendrick said a chief scientist will be appointed, and he stressed that the scientific oversight provided by this person and by the peer-review panels would not be subsumed by the administrative director. He said the reorganization was in fact designed to raise the visibility of the programme by putting it on an equal footing with the Agricultural Research Service

(USDA's intramural research organization) and the Cooperative State Research Service (which administers the formula funds).

Schauer, who is leaving her position on 13 May, argued, however, that the "visibility and integrity" of the programme came from having a respected academic researcher as its director. The changes will mean that "we won't have someone whose main responsibility is the competitive grants programme".

And Lawrence Bogorad, a plant scientist at Harvard University, voiced concern that without Schauer, and without an outsider in the director's chair, the programme may be more vulnerable to traditional bureaucratic manoeuvring. "If you get a real inside person, he can't fight for the money", Bogorad said, whereas an outsider, who has no stake in career advancement within USDA, has nothing to lose in fighting and stepping on toes if necessary.

Stephen Budiansky

Seveso trial begins

THE Seveso trial will have begun in earnest this week (11 May) at Monza, near Milan. Although the trial opened as originally planned on 18 April, it was promptly adjourned after a number of residents from the area of Seveso sought to join to the criminal trial of three employees of the operating company civil suits for the recovery of damages. One possibility is that the court at Monza may decide that these should be dealt with separately, another is that the claims may be settled privately.

The Italian company whose employees are being prosecuted is Givaudan, a wholly owned subsidiary of Hoffmann La Roche. The company's Meda plant near Seveso had been built for the production of trichlorophenol, itself an intermediate in the manufacture of the antibacterial agent hexachlorophene. The accident in which an estimated 150 grammes of dioxin was released occurred on 10 July 1976, when 18 square kilometres downwind of the plant were contaminated and close on 750 people were evacuated from the most seriously contaminated area.

For practical purposes, Roche has already admitted liability for many of the consequences of the accident, and had by the end of last year set aside £46 million in payments to inconvenienced local authorities and for contamination and had paid £11 million in compensation to individuals, including farmers and people whose homes or land were contaminated. Whether the managers and designers of the plant were criminally negligent will be decided by the Monza court, but not quickly. □

Dioxin

When was the danger known?

Washington

IN the United States, where more than 20,000 Vietnam war veterans are suing the chemical industry for illnesses and genetic damage they blame on exposure to dioxin within the defoliant Agent Orange, a federal court has been hearing a series of spectacular charges and counter-charges about the point at which the industry and the federal government became aware of the health dangers of dioxin.

Lawyers for the veterans have suggested that the industry, led by the Dow Chemical Company, knew as early as 1965 about the toxic impurities within 2,4,5-T — a principal component of Agent Orange — but suppressed the knowledge to prevent "excessive" government regulation. Dow, meanwhile, has alleged that the Depart-



ment of Defense was aware of evidence linking dioxin with birth defects several years before using Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Court papers filed for the veterans include a memorandum written in March 1965 by a chemist for the Hercules Powder Company shortly after attending a private meeting convened by Dow at which company scientists reported that toxic impurities in 2,4,5-T had caused severe liver damage in rabbits. In a memorandum several weeks later, a fellow Hercules scientist reports having been telephoned by a Dow executive and warned to keep the findings away from the federal government.

Now Dow has alleged that both the company and the Defense Department were in possession by 1969 of a National Cancer Institute study linking dioxin with birth defects in mice. Spraying with Agent Orange in Vietnam did not end until 1971. If Dow can satisfy the court that the federal government knew of the dangers, and that Dow merely produced the herbicide according to government specifications, it cannot be held liable for damages sought by the veterans.

Until now, Dow's defence has been based on its belief that exposure to the herbicide could not have been responsible for the injuries the veterans ascribe to it.

Peter David