US national laboratories

Government asks at last for changes

Washington

SOMETHING is, after all, to be done about the national laboratories. Heads of research for nine federal agencies are meeting this week to plan their response to a presidential call for sweeping changes in the way the government runs its 755 federal laboratories — which together spend some $15,000 million a year, nearly a third of the federal science budget. The meeting is the first of a new committee chaired by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) which has been given until July 1984 to begin to implement the recommendations of a report on the laboratories published earlier this year by a panel led by David Packard of the Hewlett-Packard Company.

When the White House Science Council issued the much-delayed Packard report in July it was greeted by a chorus of yawns. After a year of work, Packard and his colleagues produced a skimpy document which repeated the findings of a score of similar reports over the past two decades (see *Nature* 21 July, p.199). Like its predecessors, the Packard report complained that government departments meddle too much in the detailed management of their laboratories, that the missions of individual laboratories are often fuzzy and that government scientists, hamstrung by civil service regulations, are paid too little.

Soon, however, the yawns may have to be stifled. The big difference between the Packard report and its precursors is that it appears to have won the immediate endorsement of the President. In August, President Reagan ordered the heads of all government departments to cooperate with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OSTP in drafting a plan to implement the report. Packard, a personal friend of the President, intends to ensure that at least some of the report's recommendations stich.

The inter-agency group will have an uphill struggle. Some recommendations, such as appointing laboratory directors on fixed-term contracts and improving relations between federal laboratories and the universities, are straightforward. Others are certain to face opposition from Congress and from the very government departments called on to implement them. These are the main difficulties:

Pay and promotion: Packard wants the pay of federally employed scientists raised substantially to compete with universities and industry. At present, government-operated laboratories are hampered by a civil service salary ceiling that makes it impossible to match the salaries offered elsewhere to very senior scientists. For example, the top salary that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) can offer a physician — $73,800 — compares badly with the salaries of between $90,000 and $120,000 commonly earned by department chairmen and full professors in medical schools. But other laboratories suffer too: last year the Naval Research Laboratory could offer only $58,000 when advertising for a technical director to supervise a staff of several thousands and a budget of several hundred million dollars. Entry level salaries also lag. Federal laboratories looking for a newly graduated engineer in a "hot" field such as electronics can pay only $22,000 compared with an industry average of $27,000.

Civil service rules complicate promotions as well. Advancement through pay grades is linked to administrative responsibilities, making it difficult for laboratories to reward staff for their scientific performance alone. And a merit pay system introduced by the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act links bonuses to performance that is measured over a single year at a time.

To improve matters at all effectively will mean persuading Congress to pass legislation that will increase federal spending and asking the civil service unions to agree that some of their members should receive higher pay while others continue to lose their jobs. Administrators within departments that run federal laboratories can also be expected to complain if the pay of scientists who are nominally their juniors is allowed to overtake their own.

Government oversight: Packard wants to end "micromanagement" — the habitual tendency of departments to interfere in detailed management of the laboratories. The departments agree in principle but baulk at giving up too much control. The Department of Energy (DoE) is looking for ways to cut paperwork (Oak Ridge claims it must file 700 progress reports a year). It is unlikely, however, that DoE wants to establish a genuinely arms-length relationship with its laboratories. The future of the department itself remains in doubt and its tight control of the laboratories is a weapon it will not willingly surrender.

On one micromanagement issue, DoE and OSTP have already squared up for a fight. The Packard report, complaining that laboratory directors have too little say in selecting their own priorities, wants between 5 and 10 per cent of the laboratories' budget to be spent at the discretion of the directors. DoE officials maintain that in the case of the major energy and weapons laboratories it would be foolhardy to give directors control of such large amounts of money. So far, DoE is unwilling to consider doing much more than setting aside between 1 and 2 per cent of the laboratories' budgets as "seed money" for exploratory research. OMB and the appropriations committees in Congress are likely to agree with DoE's position.

Defining missions: According to Packard, many federal laboratories are uncertain about what their proper mission is, or continue to perform missions that are no longer useful. Parent departments see this aspect of the report as a golden opportunity to shake up or even close some of the 700 or so laboratories which employ fewer than 500 professional staff. But most of the money for federal laboratories — nearly 70 per cent — is consumed by the 50 institutions with more than 500 staff.

Packard and OSTP do not want the major facilities to be let off the hook just because their size makes it difficult for them to change direction or, indeed, close down. OSTP suspects, for example, that many of the laboratories established by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) have had little purpose since the end of the Apollo programme. OSTP would also like to use the Packard exercise to force major changes on some DoE laboratories. At his press conference in July, Packard said the Argonne and Brookhaven laboratories needed to think again about their roles.

Agency representatives on the new committee, meeting this week, can be expected to applaud the Packard report's call for increased efficiency and better management. They may well shudder at the prospect of a major political fight over the future of their biggest laboratories. **Peter David**

London merger

THE University of London last week was mildly pleased with the first response of the British University Grants Committee (UGC) to its proposals for a radical internal restructuring. In a letter from the new chairman of the committee, Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, the university was told that its plans for amalgamating Bedford and Royal Holloway colleges on the latter's site at Egham, Surrey, will be given as fair a wind as UGC can manage.

The letter also says that UGC "warmly approves" the plan to build extra student accommodation at the site and even raises the question whether enough students are being catered for. (UGC has agreed that the new college should mortgage part of its site for construction money.)

The only fly in the ointment is that UGC wants further discussion on the intended student population at the new college in the light of the British Government's projection of falling student demand in the 1990s and the likelihood that places in science and technology will be favoured over those in the arts and humanities. A further difficulty for the merged college is that its size may be reduced below the 3,000 students now planned. □

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