

## Federal laboratories Packard calls for flexibility

*New York*

IMPORTANT changes in pay and conditions may be on the horizon for scientists employed in the United States' 700 federal laboratories, which include the National Institutes of Health and laboratories run by the Departments of Energy, Defense and Agriculture. An interdepartmental committee headed by the White House science office has drafted legislation to free the laboratories from civil service pay regulations so that they can better compete with the universities and industry for talented scientists and engineers.

Addressing last week's meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Mr David Packard, chairman of California's Hewlett-Packard Corporation, said the model legislation was proposed in a draft report to be submitted to President Reagan in July. But he predicted that the legislation would stir up considerable opposition from vested interests in the civil service.

Mr Packard, a personal friend of President Reagan, strongly criticized the civil service's inflexible procedures for pay and promotion in a review of the federal laboratories he conducted last year for the White House Science Council. The new legislation, he said, would create a separate personnel system for scientists and technicians, replace narrow pay bands with broad ones, waive the existing pay ceiling for senior employees and allow promotions to take account of merit as well as seniority.

The report going to President Reagan in July will claim there has already been impressive progress towards implementing other recommendations in last year's Packard report. In response to a call for clearer definitions of the missions of each of the national laboratories, for example, the Agricultural Research Service has for the first time drawn up long-term research plans for its institutions. And the Department of Energy has begun to make its laboratories produce five-year plans in which each institution must state its direction, role, expected changes and budgets.

But the director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Dr Herman Postma, told AAAS that progress had been uneven. Both Congress and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) continued to block a proposal to bring financial stability to the laboratories by setting rolling budgets for two or three years at a time. The Department of Energy, responding to Packard and earlier reports, had begun to give each laboratory an "exploratory budget" to be spent at its director's discretion, but the level was between half and one per cent of the laboratories' budgets instead of the 5 to 10 per cent recommended by Packard.

**Peter David**

## Antarctic treaty

# Minnows smell a rat

*Tokyo*

THE Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCP) ended their secret deliberations in Tokyo on 31 May with the announcement that "good progress" had been made towards an agreement permitting the exploitation of Antarctic mineral resources. Representatives of nations that have no say in how Antarctica is to be carved up, as well as conservation groups that had come to Tokyo to monitor the meeting, took a less charitable view.

Of the sixteen members of the Antarctic Treaty, seven have territorial claims to huge areas of the continent which have been held in abeyance since the treaty was signed in 1959. Entry now is restricted to those who carry out a full programme of research in the Antarctic. Despite the very great cost of maintenance of bases and ice breakers capable of reaching them, both Brazil and India thought it worthwhile to join last year (see *Nature* 307, 105; 1984).

Under discussion in Tokyo, at the Fifth Special Mineral Resources Meeting, was a plan put forward by New Zealand representative Chris Beeby. The meeting was surrounded by secrecy — despite repeated protests from the Netherlands, not even representatives of the fifteen nations that have signed the Antarctic Treaty but which do not carry out research there (the "Non-Consultative Group") were allowed to send observers. But copies of the original draft of the Beeby plan were circulated by conservation groups, and individual delegates were willing to discuss privately amendments made since the last meeting.

Essentially, the plan proposes that mineral exploitation be regulated by three types of institution. At the top is a central commission which will be the ultimate political body for the whole mineral regime, with membership restricted to the 16 ATCP members and to nations with definite plans for mineral exploitation. Next will come a scientific and advisory committee whose members will be appointed by the central commission, to provide "technical guidelines" including those for environmental protection. It will not, however, have any power to enforce these guidelines.

Real power will reside with "regulatory committees", one for each area of the Antarctic when a proposal is made for exploitation in that region. Each will contain representatives from the United States, the Soviet Union, four nations with territorial claims, the nation proposing mineral development and another nation nominated by it.

What this plan neatly achieves is an accommodation between those with territorial claims and nations that actually want to carry out mining operations in the Antarctic. Beeby speaks proudly of the great success that the Antarctic Treaty has

achieved over the past twenty years in keeping international rivalries out of Antarctica. His plan is primarily concerned with maintaining this internationalist spirit while permitting mineral exploitation to take place.

But to the smaller nations the whole plan seems designed to keep power in the hands of the Antarctic Treaty members. Malaysia received overwhelming support from the last meeting of the non-aligned nations for a resolution calling for a UN debate on the Antarctic issue during 1984, a move that could end with a conference like that of the Law of the Sea which would call Antarctic resources, like ocean bed resources, the heritage of all mankind.

The non-aligned group accuses the treaty members of trying to tie up a minerals agreement to pre-empt such a move. Indeed, if environmental groups are right, preliminary investigations of Antarctic oil resources have already begun — despite a 1977 agreement to restrain exploration while "satisfactory progress" is being made towards a minerals agreement.

What disturbs the environmentalists more, however, is that there would be no publicly accessible central body with the power to ensure that the Antarctic environment is not damaged under the Beeby plan. To divide the Antarctic into regions, each under the control of an eight-nation group with an interest in exploitation, would, they claim, prevent any overall or consistent ecosystem management. And the Beeby plan contains no provision to regulate preliminary prospecting, even though a test drilling that went wrong could have appalling effects. There can be no guarantee that a nation will effectively discharge its obligation to supervise the mining operations of its nationals. Instead, the major conservation group concerned, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean coalition of 150 environmental organizations from 37 countries, is calling for an Antarctic Environmental Protection Agency to oversee all Antarctic operations. There is sympathy for this idea from some ATCP members, but not from the two superpowers.

That the Beeby plan has only been slightly modified since the last meeting of the Mineral Resources Group suggests that its form is close to being acceptable by the ATCP members and that the idea of an Environmental Protection Agency will stand little chance — although it is impossible to be sure, given the secrecy of the discussions. Discussions will continue in February 1985 with Brazil as the host country. There, for the first time, the non-consultative parties to the Antarctic Treaty will be allowed to send observers and it may be possible for more than a handful of nations to find out what is going to happen in Antarctica.

**Alun Anderson**