US agricultural research

Congress digs in heels

Washington

HOPES for an expanded programme of competitive grants for agriculture have been dashed once again by Representative Jamie Whitten (Democrat, Mississippi), chairman of the powerful House of Representatives Appropriations Committee. Last week, the House went along with Whitten's wishes, approving major cuts that his committee had made in the Reagan Administration's request of \$50 million for the programme. The new initiative in biotechnology under the programme was cut from \$28.5 million to \$10 million. Plant science was cut to half of its present level of \$15 million (also the amount requested for next year). Also missing from this year's \$34,000 million agriculture budget is \$5 million approved last year for graduate fellowships.

Representative George Brown, who has been fighting year after year to increase support for competitive grants above the \$17 million level where it has stagnated since its inception in 1978, offered an amendment on the floor of the House to restore \$10 million of the cuts to biotechnology. The amendment was rejected on a voice vote. According to Brown's staff, there was little hope that the amendment would be passed ("no-one bucks the chairman"), but Brown believed he had made his point and may have garnered some quiet support that will help when the bill goes to House-Senate conference. The Senate, which has yet to act, is likely to agree with the full administration request.

Supporters of an expanded programme of competitive grants had been optimistic this year. Many longstanding opponents — notably the land-grant colleges, which had tended to view competitive grants as a threat to their assured non-peer-reviewed federal support — have recently changed sides. The association of land-grant colleges produced a report last autumn recommending \$70 million for competitive grants for biotechnology and two US Department of Agriculture (USDA) research advisory panels had made similar recommendations. The President's science adviser, Dr George Keyworth, has also lent his personal backing.

During the floor debate, Whitten twice dismissed basic research as "finding answers for answers' sake" and suggested that biotechnology research was "based on hopes" that do not address farmers' immediate needs.

Besides ordering the cuts, Whitten's committee earmarked parts of the competitive grants funds for specific research projects — a development that the programme's supporters say threatens to subvert the principle of investigator-initiated peer-reviewed research. Most of the earmarking clearly reflects the committee's desire to rescue congressional

pet projects known as "special grants", scheduled to be phased out this year. USDA has never cared much for special grants, a programme of mandated research that gives the department little flexibility. The special grants programmes in soybean research, acid precipitation and alcohol fuels were transferred in their entirety to the competitive grants plant sciences section, a total of \$1.7 million in earmarked funds; two new sections were created in the competitive programme to accommodate \$3.5 million in special grants programme on aquaculture, gypsy moths, boll weevil and pine bark beetle; and, apparently for lack of a better place to put it, \$250,000 for "sugar cane in Hawaii" was inserted in the biotechnology section.

Data protection

UK bill improved and approved

THE British Government's Data Protection Bill, substantially modified during its committee and report stages, was finally approved by the House of Commons at its third reading last week. The bill sets out to provide for the first time the statutory right of access for individuals to data that are held about them in machine-readable form, while at the same time preventing unauthorized disclosure of such information. Despite the highly contentious exceptions to these general principles, the official opposition declared itself content with the concessions offered by the government last week and did not oppose the bill, which now returns to the House of Lords. It is expected to gain the Royal Assent within the next month.

One of the most controversial clauses of the bill would have allowed medical data to be passed to outside agencies such as the Inland Revenue or the police by people other than health professionals. A medical inter-professional working group under the chairmanship of Sir Douglas Black has drawn up a code of practice to govern the disclosure of medical information, and after extensive lobbying the government has now accepted that these should in principle apply to computerized health data wherever they occur. A government amendment to the bill will allow the Home Secretary to bring in codes of practice, based on those to be used within the Health Service, wherever these precautions are thought necessary.

Universities and examination boards had been worried that the bill's provisions would allow examination candidates access to their marks even before the examination results were officially published. That anomaly has also been rectified; candidates for examinations will in future be allowed access to their marks only 5 months after the request, or 40 days after the examina-

Taking into account the cuts and earmarking, the competitive programme received only an additional \$497,000 in unrestricted funds over the current appropriation.

Meanwhile, there are increasing signs that USDA's in-house research arm, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), is taking biotechnology seriously. Both Beltsville, ARS's chief research centre, and an ARS laboratory in Albany, California, are to become centres for biotechnology. Beltsville officials are speaking of quadrupling research in this area over the coming years. The Albany laboratory will also receive increased support, and collaboration is planned with researchers at the University of California at Davis. Most of the new effort will apparently be supported by a shift of existing funding, since ARS is to receive only a 3 per cent increase in next year's budget.

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tion results are published, whichever should be sooner. Some university vice-chancellors had, however, hoped that candidates' access would be delayed until 90 days after publication of results, to discourage frivolous challenges to the accuracy of examination data from disgruntled candidates.

Other modifications incorporated during the bill's committee and report stages will allow individuals access to data held about them for the purposes of immigration control, and will allow individuals damaged through inaccurate data the right to compensation for damage and distress. The data protection registrar is to play a more active role than was originally foreseen, promoting codes of practice among data users and pursuing complaints raised by individuals about whom data are held.

Blanket exemption in the bill's earlier version that would have allowed the Home Secretary to exclude any or all government-held data from the bill's disclosure provisions have been considerably curtailed, and small data banks held solely for payroll accounting purposes will not now have to register under the act.

Last week's debate was remarkable for the unaccustomed affability and cordiality displayed between the Home Office minister involved, Mr David Waddington, and the speakers of the official opposition, mainly Mr Robert Kilroy-Silk and Mr Denis Howell. Only Liberal Members of Parliament seemed still determined to score every point they could. It seems that the committee debates on this controversial bill were more than usually productive, and most of its former opponents seem satisfied with the changes that have been made. The bill will allow Britain to ratify the European Convention on Data Protection.

Tim Beardsley