

US research

Campus bonanza from the military

Washington

US SECRETARY of Defense Caspar Weinberger last week announced the first round of winners in a \$110 million bonanza designed to improve universities' military research capabilities. The University Research Initiative (URI) will support 86 research projects at 70 institutions with awards ranging in value between \$170,000 and \$3 million.

The projects supported cover a wide spectrum. Most are intended to bring together small groups of researchers from different disciplines. But funds will also be set aside for instrumentation and for fellowships designed to encourage exchanges between universities and other institutions, especially the Department of Defense (DoD)'s own laboratories. Awards are conditional upon the successful conclusion of negotiations between DoD and the institutions.

The universities' enthusiastic response to URI seems to suggest that sensitivity on campus to military research has all but vanished. According to Dr Ronald Kerber, deputy under secretary of defence for research and advanced technology, most of the 963 URI research proposals received were of strikingly high quality. Kerber sees the large number of proposals received — worth nearly \$6,000 million in funds — as confirming universities' willingness to conduct basic research of possible military interest. Kerber said there had been no evidence of boycotts by academics opposed to the growth in the defence research budget.

Awards are typically in the \$1 million–\$2 million range, less than the \$4 million originally expected. That, Kerber explains, was partly to prevent faculty from "building empires". A single faculty member can be well supported with about \$200,000, so the average group will be of between five and ten researchers. Several awards will go to consortia of two or more universities.

Awards were made on the basis of competitive review by DoD scientists, helped by some outside consultants. As expected, most go to materials science and electronics.

Composite materials and electronic control dominate; there is also special emphasis on artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, oceanography, hydrodynamics and biological structures. The awards, lasting 3–5 years, will be made through the Army Research Office, the Office of Naval Research, the Air Force Office of Scientific Research and the Defense Advanced Projects Research Agency.

The awards are still conditional upon availability of funds in DoD's budget for

fiscal year 1987, but Congress has so far strongly supported URI providing funds beyond those requested. The first URI round comes out of 1986 and 1987 funds; the next round will not be until 1988. All URI projects will be unclassified, and Kerber expects them to remain so.

Tim Beardsley

Scraping the barrel

Washington

IRONICALLY, on the day that US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger announced the first competitive awards to be made under DoD's new University Research Initiative, the Senate finally gave in to pressure from the House of Representatives to divert \$55.6 million of DoD funds to unreviewed research and construction projects at nine named universities and colleges.

The funds are provided in amendments to an emergency DoD money bill. Ten such "pork-barrel" projects were approved at the end of last year. But as they had not been subjected to peer review, they were opposed by DoD itself, which prefers to make research awards by competitive merit review (see *Nature* 321, 549; 1986).

Several of the universities provided for in the DoD bill employed influential lobbying and public relations companies in Washington to make their case to wavering congressmen. Their task was made easier because federal support for university facilities is generally agreed to be inadequate, and politicians like to be seen appearing to benefit education in their home states.

Two attempts were made in the Senate to block the disputed projects, but the Senate finally voted 56–42 last Thursday to accept a House version of the bill that reinstated nine pork-barrel projects. The Senate Appropriations Committee's report notes, however, that the Senate does not intend to support similar unreviewed projects in future.

The original ten pork-barrel projects in the DoD appropriation bill were reduced to nine last December when Frank Rhodes, president of Cornell University, refused to accept \$10 million that Congress had earmarked for computer research there, unless the project was approved by merit review.

The universities due to benefit from Congress's generosity are: Wichita State (\$5 million); Nevada (\$3.5 million); Oklahoma State (\$1 million); Iowa State (\$6.5 million); Rochester Institute of Technology (\$11.1 million); Syracuse (\$12 million); Northeastern (\$13.5 million); Oregon Graduate Center (\$1 million); and Kansas (\$2 million).

Tim Beardsley

Falkland Islands

Opinions divided on penguin deaths

"NUCLEAR cargo" from the four British ships sunk during the Falklands conflict is polluting the South Atlantic, according to Soviet officials in Buenos Aires. At a press conference called last week to condemn President Reagan's unilateral repudiation of the SALT II agreement, the Soviet representatives claimed that the British military presence in the Falklands was a major threat to world peace, and that "the Argentines now have their own Chernobyl in the Atlantic".

This allegation was said to be based on research by the Buenos Aires correspondent of the Moscow weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Mr Vladimir Vesenskii, and on the Spanish newspaper *Cambio 16*. Vesenskii, the only civilian on the three-man Soviet panel, claimed that all four ships had had nuclear weapons on board and that *HMS Sheffield*, after being damaged by Argentine bombs, had been sunk by the British themselves "because of the danger of contamination". Vesenskii implied that contamination from these alleged bombs was responsible for the recent appearance of larger numbers of dead penguins "on the Malvinas beaches". Quoting an unnamed Argentine legislator, Vesenskii said that the "outer casings of the nuclear bombs were designed for dry places, not the ocean".

Asked if the Soviet Union had any information proving that there are now nuclear bombs on the Falklands, the Soviet charge d'affaires Viktor Tkachenko said simply that the Soviet Union and Argentina were "greatly concerned" about the building of a British military base on the islands, and called for Argentine-Soviet military relations to be strengthened at the "non-strategic level".

Vera Rich

● Results from UK laboratories seem to show that the penguin death-rate, in fact, is considerably worse than Vesenskii implied. He spoke of "tens" of dead penguins being washed up. In fact, from mid-February, elevated death rates of rockhopper penguins, and, to a lesser extent, gentoo penguins, began to be observed, and on 25 May, more than 3,000 dead rockhoppers were counted in a single rookery on New Island (off West Falkland).

Three batches of specimens have been sent to the United Kingdom, to the laboratories of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). Preliminary reports indicate that the birds died of starvation. Some appear to have suffered from puffinosis, a viral disease affecting sea-birds, and some show elevated lead levels in liver and kidneys. □