New rules for US research grants prove a popular choice

Big Pine Key, Florida

SOME of the layers of bureaucracy separating researchers and the agencies which fund their work will be peeled away under a nationwide grant administration programme due to begin this month. The Federal Demonstration Project will bring together eight government agencies and over 35 universities to try out new streamlined procedures for administering federal grants.

The national project is an extension of a successful smaller test programme begun

over two years ago and involving several universities in Florida. The experiment linked the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Departments of Energy (DoE) and Agriculture and the Office of Naval Research with the Florida State University System and the University of Miami.

The objective was to tell whether simplifying the grant reporting process could enhance research productivity without compromising the accountability of the grant recipients. In the test project, each of the agencies, as now, assessed the scientific quality and financial responsibility of grant programmes before and after they were awarded. But while grants were current, many of the management issues on which agency approval would normally have been required was delegated to the researchers themselves.

In particular, researchers were permitted to start spending their funds as much as 90 days before the formal starting date, and to carry forward unspent money into subsequent periods. They were also allowed to spend funds on foreign travel and permanent equipment, to make line-item changes in their budgets and to extend their grants for up to twelve months without agency approval.

Most federal agencies, including some not directly participating in the project, are now working towards using the new procedures. NASA has already implemented many of the reforms. Now the

Veterans Administration, the Department of Education and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission are considering using all or part of the procedures soon. NIH, NSF and DoE also plan to begin using them to administer nearly all their grants, not just those received by participating institutions.

Even so, the participating institutions are not claiming that the new arrangements are a way of saving money. Don Phillips, head of the National Academy of Sciences' Government-University-Industry Research Roundtable (GUIRR), which coordinated the experiment, says the two most important results of the Florida project were that it showed that federal agencies could work together to reduce red tape, and that doing so would improve researchers' attitudes towards the sponsored research system and give them more time to do research.

The difficulty with the current grant system, members of the Roundtable say, is that federal research support has acquired administrative, managerial and financial procedures which hinder research by treating it as a procurement system rather than as a long-term investment. The approach forces research programmes to be compartmentalized into "arbitrary project units", leading to "transaction-by-transaction accountability" and lack of flexibility. Treating research as an investment instead produces less friction and enhances productivity.

For the federal project, the Environmental Protection Agency, the research arms of the Army and Air Force and 26 more universities will be added to those who participated in the Florida project.

Martha Cleveland

Olympic dope-test net misses Poles

Warsaw

THE Polish government last year invested \$900,000 of its scanty hard currency reserves in establishing a state-of-the-art centre for testing athletes for drugs. Yet according to the Communist Party daily, *Trybuna Ludu*, three of the Polish squad at Seoul had no right to be there. Track-and-field athletes Jolanta Janota, Ewa Pisiewicz and Agnieszka Siwek, said *Trybuna Ludu*, had refused anti-doping tests during the Polish national games in August, and according to the Polish rules "refusal to submit to an anti-doping test is equivalent to testing positive". Poland's chief track-and-field coach, Honorat Wisniewski, issued a formal protest, saying that he and his fellow coaches "would not take responsibility for the effects, whether in or outside of sport, of sending these three competitors to the Seoul Olympic Games". The members of the Polish "Anti-Doping Commission", *Trybuna Ludu* suggested, had simply "hidden their heads in the sand" in allowing the women to go.

In Seoul none of the women finished in the first four places for which testing is mandatory, nor were they selected for random testing. Unlike Calgary, therefore, Seoul posed no threat to Poland's national honour. But the incident throws some doubt on the Polish authorities attitude to their own 'Anti-Doping Commission', and the *Trybuna Ludu* comment is less than fair to the two scientists from the anti-doping laboratory who are also members of the commission. For the decision to send the three women to Seoul was taken when both scientists were absent from Warsaw — one on vacation, and one carrying out routine anti-doping tests elsewhere in Poland. No attempt, apparently, was made either to recall them or to postpone the meeting of the commission for a day or two until at least one of the scientists could be present.

Vera Rich

US places further regulations on pesticide manufacturers

Washington

AFTER two years of wrangling, Congress last week passed a bill authorizing the re-examination of over 600 previously approved pesticides, to allow a more complete assessment of their effects on the environment and public health. The bill amends the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) — the major piece of legislation governing pesticides in the United States — to require manufacturers to submit new data on pesticides approved before the end of 1984.

The bill represents a compromise between environmentalists, who had hoped for stiffer laws governing pesticides, and the chemical industry. Pesticide manufacturers will be required to pay for the re-testing process and to subsidize part of the \$42 million per year the government is estimated to spend on evaluating the new data. But it does not contain provisions to

protect groundwater supplies from contamination, to identify violators and force them to pay for clean-up procedures, or to clamp down on exports of pesticides unapproved in the United States, items the environmentalists would like to have seen included.

One of the most controversial points of the bill concerned the alteration of the 'indemnification' clause of the old law, under which the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was obliged to reimburse a manufacturer for stockpiles of approved pesticides which it later banned. The obligation has slowed down the removal of dangerous pesticides from the market in the past because the government could not afford the payments. The current bill takes away the indemnification requirement, and allows the EPA instead to consider payments to manufacturers on a case-by-case basis.

Carol Ezzell