

Science marshalled to cut bioterror confusion

Rex Dalton, San Diego

Scientists began to play a more prominent role in telling the American people about bioterrorism this week, as the Bush administration responded to heavy criticism of its initial public statements on anthrax.

Top researchers, including John Marburger, the president's newly confirmed science adviser, and Tony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, joined senior members of the administration in public appearances. As well as assuming a more visible public role in discussing bioterrorism attacks, the researchers took part in top-level meetings in Washington to plan a response to anthrax or other agents that might be directed at the United States.

Until about a week ago, administration officials, such as Tom Ridge, head of homeland security, and Tommy Thompson, the health secretary, often spoke alone, providing conflicting information — and occasional misstatements were blamed on their lack of scientific expertise.

Responding to the change in emphasis, Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences, said that it was “better late than never”. Alberts, who was strongly critical of some initial government responses to the bioterror attacks, added that the administration had been “ambiguous about who is in charge” of its scientific assessment of the crisis.

But with Marburger confirmed by the Senate on 23 October as Bush's science adviser and director of the White House Office of Sci-

ence and Technology Policy (OSTP), Alberts and others are hoping for a change.

“What makes sense now is a close partnership between Ridge's homeland security office and the OSTP,” Alberts said. And the partnership did not take long to materialize: on 29 October, Marburger appeared alongside Ridge at his daily public news briefing, which was also attended by scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the US Army.

But Ridge's office, which was created after the 11 September attacks to guard the home front in the war against terrorism, has only around a dozen senior staff and limited authority over agencies such as the CDC, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the defence department.

Already, there is evidence of turf battles among these organizations, as they respond to the anthrax attacks. One scientific source says there have been significant breakdowns in communication among some of the agencies.

As the bioterrorism issue develops, concern remains over still-unfilled scientific posts in the administration, including those of director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

Fauci's emergence over the past week as a prominent spokesman for the administration on public-health matters has fuelled speculation that he may be about to take the NIH position. ■



John Marburger, the president's new science adviser, aims to assume a high-profile role.



Homeland security chief Tom Ridge has started to strengthen links with scientists.

BROOKHAVEN NATIONAL LAB.

R. EDMONDS/AP

Germany warned over threat posed by nuclear reactor

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

A nuclear watchdog is warning that a German research reactor will continue to

pose a security risk, despite a last-minute plan to cut the amount of weapons-grade uranium to be used at the site.

The FRM-II reactor, housed at the Technical University of Munich in Bavaria, is designed to run on highly enriched uranium (HEU), weapons-grade material that contains a high percentage of the uranium-235 isotope.

Under the compromise, the reactor would be converted to run on medium-enriched uranium (MEU) by 2010. The Bavarian government, which is responsible for running the reactor, defines MEU as containing less than 50% uranium-235.

But the Washington-based Nuclear Control Institute, a non-profit body that monitors worldwide nuclear activity, says that the compromise will do little to reduce the proliferation risk from the reactor.

“MEU is an artificial term,” says Paul Leventhal, director of the NCI. “Uranium containing more than 20% of uranium-235

is weapons-grade, and therefore classified as HEU. This agreement means that weapons-grade material will have to be stored at a place without military protection against terrorist attacks.”

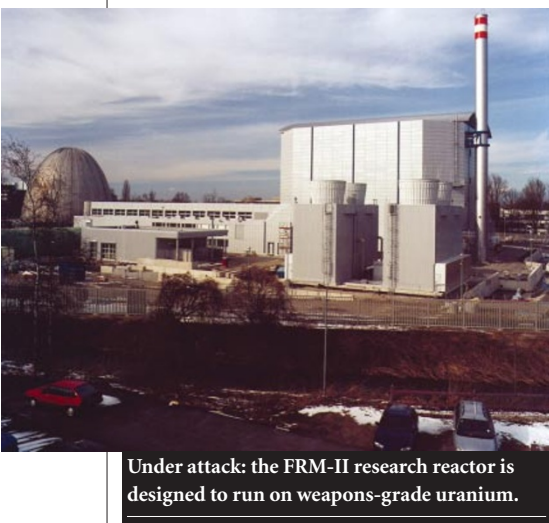
The NCI says that low-enriched uranium (LEU), which contains less than 20% uranium-235, is the only safe option. But the Bavarian authorities have previously rejected this idea because costly structural changes would be needed for the reactor to use LEU.

Construction of FRM-II was finished in July, but the federal government refused to let it go into operation until the plan to phase out HEU was agreed.

The reactor could enter its eight-month test phase this coming January if, as expected, the government grants the reactor an operating licence next month. The compromise has the backing of the German cabinet, as well as scientists who have booked research time at the facility. ■

▶ www.nci.org

FRM-II



Under attack: the FRM-II research reactor is designed to run on weapons-grade uranium.