

US budget envisages level funds for NASA, more for environment

Washington. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is requesting roughly the same amount in next year's budget that it expects to receive from Congress this year, namely \$13.8 billion. This is 4.2 per cent less than the budget it received in 1995. It also marks a \$100-million decline from projections that were being made by the White House for NASA's 1997 budget as recently as last summer.

Spending on space science, an account that includes astrophysics, planetary exploration and space physics, would drop by 8.4 per cent from the expected 1996 appropriation, to a total of \$1.86 billion. This is largely due to a decrease in the funds required for the Cassini mission to Saturn and for the Advanced X-Ray Astrophysics Facility, both of which are nearing their launch dates. At \$498 million, the budget for life and micro-gravity sciences is slightly higher than this year, signalling a gradual increase in efforts aimed at developing experiments to be conducted on the space station.

NASA's request for the Mission to Planet Earth is \$1.4 billion, an increase of 8 per cent over the expected 1996 level, and an indication of the administration's determination to continue this embattled programme, which has recently come under some critical scrutiny in Congress. Funding for human space flight, which includes both the space station and the space shuttle, remains about level at \$5.86 billion.

In the Department of Interior, the administration also is holding close to budget lines drawn in Congress over the past several months. The 1997 request for the US Geological Survey (USGS) is \$746 million, including \$145 million for "natural resources research", the remnants of the now-defunct National Biological Service. The budget represents a 2.1 per cent increase over the USGS's expected 1996 appropriation.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is requesting \$83 million for work on endangered species. This includes \$7.5 million for listing new species, money that Congress virtually deleted for 1996.

The Environmental Protection Agency is seeking \$579 million for its research and development efforts, amounting to 9.8 per cent more than this year's expected Congressional appropriation, but only 84.8 per cent of the figure that the administration had originally requested for 1996. But the final EPA figure for this year was still up in the air at the beginning of this week; the White House has made environmental funding a key sticking point in its ongoing budget negotiations with Congress.

Tony Reichhardt

Ministers seek legal shelter from Canada's HIV inquiry

Montreal. Provincial governments in Canada are alleged to have demanded that Justice Horace Krever, who is heading a commission of inquiry into the distribution of HIV-infected blood in the 1980s, should sign a statement promising not to make findings of misconduct against their ministers or their predecessors.

When this request was denied, according to an affidavit filed by Marlens Edwardh, counsel for the commission, the ministers are said to have ordered the lawyer to say they had not been adequately represented by legal counsel at the hearings.

The allegations come after provincial governments, the Canadian Red Cross Society, pharmaceutical companies and a host of individuals — including 34 former provincial ministers of health — have already taken legal action to prevent Krever from including information in his final report that could expose them to criminal or civil proceedings (see *Nature* 379, 479; 1996).

It now appears that they are not stopping there. Edwardh states in her affidavit that, in a series of telephone calls, William Craik, a lawyer representing 10 provinces and territories, said that the provinces were "exceedingly upset" that their ministers had been identified by Krever as being among those who might be linked to allegations of potential wrongdoing.

The affidavit states that, during the

course of this conversation, Craik "asked whether the commissioner would sign a statement indicating there would be no findings of civil or criminal responsibility against the ministers". Edwardh added that she recalled "a second request which related to the promise of not naming the ministers in the report".

Edwardh rejected the suggestion, and two days later, the commission received a letter from Craik refusing to accept the notices about possible wrongdoing on the grounds that he represented only the provinces, and not the ministers or government employees personally. According to Edwardh, all contact with individuals was, until then, required to be made through counsel appointed by the provinces, the federal government and the Canadian Red Cross Society.

Meanwhile, the Red Cross, which is also under fire from Krever, has been trying to force the commission to release some of its internal correspondence. The society wanted a list of all written material reviewed by Krever before sending out notices of possible misconduct, and related documents.

But a ruling released by Justice George Richards says there was no reason for such documents to be made public, as there is no indication that they contain new evidence. The laws of evidence, said Richards, are "not intended to authorize a fishing expedition".

David Spurgeon

Cash crisis halts nuclear power in India

New Delhi. A shortage of funds and a lack of political commitment have brought India's nuclear power programme to a halt, and a company set up by the government ten years ago to build and operate nuclear power stations has admitted that it is on the verge of liquidation.

A parliamentary committee that had been listening to the woes of nuclear industry for more than six months concluded in its report, published two weeks ago, that the government has been guilty of neglecting nuclear power. It has called for urgent action to bail the Nuclear Power Corporation (NPC) out of its financial crisis.

When it was set up in 1986, NPC was expected to build 22 nuclear plants, with a total installed capacity of 10,000 MW, by the year 2000. In the event, the government curtailed the programme, approving only four plants. This *ad hoc* policy, according to the committee, has put a heavy burden on the company, which had borrowed US\$750 million in the hope of obtaining a matching grants from the government.

NPC now owes \$100 million in interest

alone, and must find \$350 million to cover equipment orders placed for power plants that will not now be built. Another \$450-million-worth of nuclear components being held in storage will have to be sold as scrap. NPC says that, without government funding, it doubts whether it will be able to complete the four nuclear plants that are under construction.

India has estimated reserves of 75,000 tonnes of uranium and 360,000 tonnes of thorium, an element that can be converted into fissile uranium-233 on bombardment with neutrons. DAE had always argued that the best way to use these resources was through a three-tier strategy: burning uranium in thermal reactors, using the resulting plutonium in fast breeder reactors surrounded by 'blankets' of thorium, and finally building reactors fuelled by U-233.

But it now turns out that the programme is stuck at the first stage. By the end of the decade, India will have only ten reactors, fuelled by natural uranium, producing a total of about 2,320 MW, about 1,000 MW more than at present.

K. S. Jayaraman