

## for agencies

ATP, funded through the Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) is much less than the president wanted. But it does keep the programme alive.

Existing projects will have first call on the money, says Michael Newman, a spokesman for NIST. But the agency hopes, in addition, to be able to launch a general competition for new grants this year.

Most of the final haggling over the 1996 budget concerned not money but the fate of so-called 'environmental riders' attached to budget bills by Congress in an attempt to relax environmental regulation without having to pass separate legislation.

Such riders, which would have curtailed the protection of wetlands by the Environmental Protection Agency, and extended the 'salvage forestry' of old trees, were removed altogether by Clinton.

Others, including the extension of a ban on the listing of new species under the Endangered Species Act, stay in the bill. But Clinton secured the rights for himself, as president, to waive them.

Nevertheless, some riders did take effect, including one that will stop the National Park Service from providing technical assistance to the International Convention on Biodiversity, and another enabling the University of Arizona to override environmental objections and proceed with construction of its proposed Large Binocular Telescope at Mount Graham, Arizona (see below). Colin Macilwain

## NASA head gets lean and mean

**Washington.** The head of the US space agency told his congressional overseers last week that he does not want any more money for space science next year — even if Congress offers it. Reacting to a proposal from the House of Representatives Science Committee for an increase in funding for space science while cutting back on Earth science, Daniel Goldin, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), spoke out forcefully against the plan in testimony before a House appropriations subcommittee the following day.

"I am not supportive of [additional funding for space science], regardless of what happens to Mission to Planet Earth," Goldin told the subcommittee, chaired by Jerry Lewis (Republican, California). He added that he was "vehemently opposed" to increasing money for space science in 1997, as he wants to continue teaching scientists a lesson about fiscal restraint.

Goldin said he wanted the "stress of the budget" to be felt by the space science community. Increasing the budget would send a message that scientists could return to the days of big, expensive missions and would put a chill on his philosophy of "better, cheaper, faster".

Republican staff members on the House Science Committee expressed surprise at Goldin's remarks. They said

later that they did not intend to bring back large, expensive missions, but rather to fund the kinds of innovative technology and science programmes that Goldin has championed.

These include the Discovery planetary missions (which would receive \$20 million more than NASA requested), the New Millennium technology development programme (\$18.5 million more), Explorer projects (\$25 million more) and missions to Mars (\$30 million more).

Democratic opponents of the Republican plan say it is motivated less by a desire to boost space science than to eviscerate NASA's Mission to Planet Earth, particularly the Earth Observing System (EOS) of orbiting remote-sensing spacecraft. Robert Walker (Republican, Pennsylvania), chair of the Science Committee, has always contended that his opposition to EOS is not ideological, but based on his concern that the space agency can not afford the programme as at present conceived.

The committee's proposed 1997 budget would cut \$374 million from a \$1.4-billion request for the Mission to Planet Earth, and kill the Chem-1 mission altogether. The proposal also halves the \$260 million budget for the EOS data system. Goldin spoke angrily against the proposed cuts to EOS in his testimony, saying they would be "devastating to the programme". **Tony Reichhardt**

## Mount Graham telescope gets green light from Washington

**Washington & Munich.** The long-delayed US-Italian project to build the large binocular telescope (LBT) on Mount Graham in Arizona might finally proceed, after President Bill Clinton signed a budget bill last week (see above, left) containing a provision specifically inserted to enable the project to overcome environmental objections.

A consortium of German astronomers is also poised to join the project, allowing it to be built to full specification. Officials of the University of Arizona (UoA) will this week ask a district court judge, Alfredo C. Marquez, to lift an injunction blocking construction of the telescope, in the light of the change in the law.

Construction came to a halt in 1994, after Marquez had ruled that a late site change placed the project in breach of the Endangered Species Act (see *Nature* 370, 407; 1994). Environmentalists have long tried to block the building of the LBT, first because of its alleged threat to a local species of red squirrel, and more recently on the grounds that the mountain is sacred to the San Carlos Apaches, a local Indian tribe.

Peter Strittmatter, director of the Steward Observatory at the university, declines to speculate how long it will be before construction work actually begins. Roger Angel, head of the mirror laboratory at UoA, which will build the mirrors for the telescope, says: "I hope we are talking days or weeks, but that is only speculation." Environmentalists intend to continue to fight the project, but have not announced their strategy.

There may be more surprises in store. Early this week, the Mount Graham forest was engulfed in a forest fire during the driest Arizona weather for many years. A spokeswoman for the Forest Service said that the threat to the observatory was "diminishing" as the wind direction changed.

Franco Paccini, director of the Osservatorio Astrofisica in Florence, says that Congress's decision to put an end to the legal harassment of the construction plans is "great news". But he says that the LBT schedule has been so interrupted that a delay of a year might be expected.

Initially planned as a joint US-Italian venture, the project had not been able to

secure the level of financing it had hoped for. Italy will contribute 25 per cent of the costs. The state of Arizona will pay 25 per cent, and other confirmed sources will increase the total US contribution to 42 per cent. The two countries had decided to go ahead with building the telescope with only a single mirror, hoping to find a partner to help complete the second mirror.

Driven by an enthusiastic astronomy community, Germany has now taken on that role. Scientists from various research institutions, chiefly the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy (MPIA) in Heidelberg and the Astronomy Institute Potsdam (AIP), have obtained promises of cash from various public sources.

According to Steve Beckwith, a director of the MPIA, there is now enough money committed to pay for the second mirror, and the partnership will suggest an initial level of participation of 15 per cent. But the German astronomy community would also like to provide instrumentation, and is aiming at a final contribution of 25 per cent.

**Colin Macilwain & Alison Abbott**