Colwell calls time on 'wonderful run' at NSF

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington

Rita Colwell will step down on 21 February as director of the National Science Foundation (NSF), the agency that supports most non-biomedical research in the United States, after five-and-a-half years in charge.

Colwell, the first woman and only the second biologist to lead the NSF, announced her departure at the 11 February hearing of the House Committee on Science. "It's been a wonderful run," she said afterwards. Arden Bement, a metallurgist who heads the National Institute of Standards and Technology, will run the agency until the White House chooses a permanent successor.

Colwell will now head up Canon Life Sciences, a new offshoot of the electronics company. She is resuming her professorship at the University of Maryland, College Park, and taking one up at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she will help develop a centre for the study of infectious diseases.

During her tenure, the NSF's budget grew by two-thirds, from US\$3.4 billion in 1998 to \$5.6 billion this year. The average annual NSF grant rose from \$90,000 to \$142,000, she points out, and graduate student stipends almost doubled, to \$30,000. "She's certainly been effective," says one Senate staffer.

More controversial were the millions of dollars spent on large projects, including \$300 million for a gravity-wave detector and

Rita Colwell, the first woman to run the NSF, presided over a budget rise of two-thirds in six years.

\$219 million for a network of geological observatories.

The management of these projects was criticized in the Congress (see *Nature* 418, 573; 2002) and Colwell's insistence that all of them were progressing satisfactorily irritated some. "She drove them nuts from time to time," says Joel Widder, a lobbyist and former senior NSF official who has worked for a congressional committee overseeing the agency. "She would continually insist that everything was on time and on budget."

And Colwell, a marine biologist, had

mixed results in raising money for her first love, environmental and ecological research. In 2000, she launched an interdisciplinary initiative on biocomplexity, which to date has received \$334 million. But she was unable to implement a much larger move by the agency into environmental science proposed in 1998 (see *Nature* 395, 4; 1998).

Some were surprised at an outsider being appointed as the agency's interim leader. But Bement is seen as a safe pair of hands — he knows the NSF well, having served on its governing board for six years from 1989. ■

Medical research wins simpler grants and extra cash

Laura Nelson, London

UK researchers are to get more cash and a simpler grant system, after a budget overhaul at the Medical Research Council (MRC).

The changes, which many researchers have been demanding for years, were announced on 13 February by Colin Blakemore, the MRC's chief executive. Blakemore, a neurobiologist, arrived to run the council from the University of Oxford last October.

In the financial year starting this April, the MRC will have £144 million (US\$270 million) for competitive grant proposals, up from £124 million this year. And instead of having to apply in large, cooperative groups, investigators can go it alone.

Some researchers, and the House of Commons' science and technology committee, had criticized the old scheme,

developed under Blakemore's predecessor George Radda (see *Nature* 422, 461; 2003).

The new policy is a huge improvement, says David Price, a physiologist at the University of Edinburgh. The cooperative arrangement was "incredibly bureaucratic", he says. "Now we can think about the science we have in mind, rather than looking through the MRC schemes and modifying our science to suit them." Radda declined to comment on the change.

The MRC, the second-largest of the seven UK research councils, will provide fewer types of grants, but will offer more flexibility in their size and duration. Grants will vary from two to five years, and Blakemore hopes there will be a shortening of the application process from 26 to between 20 and 22 weeks.

Blakemore says that scientists and universities were consulted extensively in drawing up the reforms. "It was clear that simpler and more flexible schemes were needed," he says.

Large MRC projects, such as a planned genetic database called Biobank, won't be squeezed by the change, he adds. But some scientists say that they ought to be. "I am concerned about the way funding is skewed towards big projects," says Jim Cohen of the MRC Centre for Developmental Neurobiology at King's College, London. ■