Oaks, California — is the world's best-selling biologic. Wyeth's expertise in developing and manufacturing biologics is particularly enticing: biologics can bring in large revenues and are more difficult to copy as generic drugs. As a result, pharmaceutical companies that have traditionally relied on small-molecule drugs are now trying to bolster their expertise in biologics.

But in the past, Pfizer's large acquisitions were blamed for slowing productivity and damaging employee morale. 'Mega-mergers' between large, mature pharmaceutical companies have an uneven track record, says Gary Pisano, a professor at the Harvard Business School in Boston, Massachusetts. "It's hard to think of how a merger of two companies that have been struggling with their pipeline performance will lead to a more innovative company," he says. "The data are pretty clear that when companies go through that, often innovative performance declines."

At a press conference on 26 January, Kindler acknowledged this legacy, but maintained that Pfizer is a very different company now. Recent restructuring has created smaller, more focused research units and streamlined management, both of which may guard against the organizational chaos that resulted from past acquisitions, he says. "We obviously have learned a lot from our prior acquisitions," he says. "This is very, very different from prior large pharmaceutical mergers." ■

Heidi Ledford

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smaller than some geoengineers would wish."

Some think it is game over. "Ocean iron fertilization is simply no longer to be taken as a viable option for mitigation of the CO_2 problem," says Hein de Baar, an oceanographer at the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research in Texel. ■

Quirin Schiermeier

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Science adviser should show his independence, says report

The UK government's chief scientific adviser has hit back at members of parliament who slammed him last week for what they see as his failure to adequately defend the use of science in policy-making.

In a report published on 20 January, the House of Commons committee for innovation, universities, science and skills criticized John Beddington, a population biologist who took up his post on 1 January 2008, for "defending government policy" when he should "champion evidence-based science within government".

Responding to the criticisms, Beddington told *Nature*: "I am surprised and disappointed about the committee's comments. I think their comments are unfair and unbalanced." But he says he intends to raise his public profile this year, by instigating a comparison of science-policy advice used by President Barack Obama and by the European Commission. "I am more than happy to challenge the government where it is appropriate," he says, "but I also need to work within government to influence policy."

In particular, the report expressed concern that Beddington has not challenged the government over its decision to provide homeopathic medicine free through the National Health Service. In contrast, David King, Beddington's predecessor, openly attacked the government's policy on homeopathy, warning that it could put patients' health at risk. Beddington says he made it "crystal clear" in oral and written evidence to the committee that he "saw no credible scientific evidence" that homeopathy is effective at treating medical conditions beyond having a placebo effect.

Phil Willis, chairman of the Commons committee that produced the report, says his group will continue to scrutinize Beddington. "It is very important that he is seen as independent," Willis says. "If the chief scientific adviser is part of the establishment and does not use his position to challenge the government in its use of science, then no one else can do it."

Nick Dusic, director of the Campaign for Science & Engineering in the UK, says "there is a general worry" among the science community that Beddington does not have as high a profile as previous science advisers, such as King and Robert May, who held the post from 1995 to 2000. "Challenging the government on its use of science in policy-making is the key job of the chief scientific adviser," says Dusic. "He may be doing this inside government, but as outsiders we are not seeing it."

IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON

John Beddington, UK chief scientific adviser.

Beddington "is a tough character and very good at what he does, but more of a low-key character than I was", says May. "As chief scientific adviser you have to operate in the culture of the civil service but must also be and be seen as an independent voice. I have no doubt he is an independent voice — I don't know if he was conveying this."

The committee's report also has harsh words for the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, which was set up in June 2007 and is responsible for science funding. Willis told *Nature* that the department had produced an "appalling" annual report, making it difficult for the committee to judge how well the department is working. "The jury is still out about the department. But it was hard to find anyone who thought it was working effectively," he says.

A spokesman for the department noted that its annual report had been produced in early 2008, when the department was less than a year old. He says it "will respond fully in due course". ■

Natasha Gilbert