

USA

● Congress has already begun to whittle down the hefty budget increase for basic research proposed by President Ford in his valedictory budget. A key House subcommittee last week substantially reduced the budget request for the National Science Foundation (NSF), and recommended some shifts in priority among NSF's programmes. Though the sub-committee's actions are likely to be revised as the NSF budget bill moves through the rest of the Congressional budget process, the proposed reductions at least sound a warning that Congress isn't going to rubber stamp the research and development proposals this year.

Ford has recommended that basic research in general be given a budgetary shot in the arm to help restore some of the inflationary losses incurred during the past few years. It has been estimated that real support for basic research in the United States shrank by about 20% between 1967 and 1975, and Ford accordingly proposed that federal support be increased next year by more than 9%—well above the anticipated 6% inflation rate. NSF's budget, in particular, would have gone up by more than 12% under Ford's proposals. Those recommendations were left unchanged by President Carter when he submitted his budget revisions to Congress late last month.

Last week, however, the House subcommittee on Science, Research and Development, which is usually friendly toward NSF, approved an authorisation bill for the foundation which would provide an increase of about 9%—enough to keep NSF a step ahead of inflation, but substantially less than the Ford budget proposal. The subcommittee, moreover, has shifted funds within NSF's total budget in such a way that the programme of Research Applied to National Needs (RANN) would bear the brunt of the reductions, while the foundation's education support programmes would be given more money than Ford had requested.

The RANN programme would be given about the same overall budget as it received this year, but the subcommittee has recommended that a sharply increased proportion of RANN funds should be spent on earthquake research. Other RANN projects would consequently be cut back. Outside those two areas, the subcommittee has essentially recommended that NSF's programmes be given cost-of-living increases.

The subcommittee's action is only

the first stage in a protracted budget process. The subcommittee bill will be taken up by the full Committee on Science and Technology this week before being sent to the House itself and, on the senate side, a subcommittee chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy has just completed hearings



on NSF's authorisation bill; it is expected to report its own version soon. Appropriations committees in both the House and Senate will then take up the measure.

It is thus likely that the subcommittee's bill will be modified considerably as it progresses through the rest of the Congressional mill, but the proposed reductions nevertheless suggest that NSF's budget may be in for a bumpy ride through Congress this year.

● Another distinguished scientist has been appointed to a top-level post in the Carter Administration. Donald Kennedy, professor of zoology at Stanford University, was last week named Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a post which has been occupied by physicians for the past 12 years.

The appointment is something of a surprise since Kennedy has had little direct experience in the political minefield of drug regulation. FDA is constantly caught in a fierce crossfire between the drug industry, consumer advocates and Congressional critics. It has been chronically short of funds to carry out its mission or regulating the powerful food, drug, cosmetics and medical devices industries, and its own research enterprise is generally acknowledged to be relatively low in quality. Kennedy will clearly have his work cut out for him.

A neurophysiologist, Kennedy's political star has been rising rapidly in Washington in the past few years. Elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 1972 at the

age of 40, he was chairman of an Academy committee which last year produced a massive and widely-publicised report on pest control problems. Late last year he was appointed a senior consultant to the newly established Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), a job which took up half his time and kept him shuttling back and forth between Washington and Stanford. While at OSTP, Kennedy is said to have played a major role in securing a substantial increase for agricultural research in President Ford's final budget. Otherwise, his experience in Washington politics has been limited.

● An international coalition of scientists, environmentalists, theologians and philosophers has been formed to seek a worldwide moratorium on most uses of recombinant DNA techniques and broader public discussion of the ethical and social implication of genetic engineering. The coalition, whose formation was announced at a press conference in Washington on Monday, includes among its sponsors Sir MacFarlane Burnett, an eminent Australian immunologist and Nobel Prize-winner. Other sponsors include Aurelio Peccei, founder of the Club of Rome, Lewis Mumford, author and philosopher, George Wald, and a number of environmentalist organisations and church leaders.

A statement endorsed by the group, which calls itself the Coalition for Responsible Genetic Research, notes that "genetic and molecular biological research is rapidly providing the basis for the practice of genetic engineering". It continues: "The continuation of this research without public understanding and approval, and in fact without a full comprehension of its potential by most of the involved scientists, poses a worldwide danger which is intensified by the fact that industrial investment in the developing genetic technology has already begun".

Citing possible health hazards from current research, including "the spread of cancer or the creation of new diseases", the statement calls for a moratorium "on all research that would produce novel genetic combinations between distant organisms which have not been demonstrated to exchange genes in nature". The moratorium should stay in effect, the coalition argues, while the ethical implications of the research are examined and the dangers assessed in public discussions.

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