

Scientists urged to end feud with White House

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington

Bill Clinton's former scientific adviser is trying to persuade leading researchers to use the start of President George Bush's second term as an opportunity to patch up their differences with the White House.

Neal Lane, who served under President Clinton from 1998 to 2001, says researchers should meet with new members of Bush's cabinet and try to re-engage with them on issues such as global warming. "When an administration is starting a new term, you've got to do everything you can to help," he says.

Bush's first term was marked by unusually bad relations between scientific leaders and the White House, senior researchers say. Aside from well-publicized disagreements on global warming and stem-cell research, they worry that scientists working inside the government, as well as independent bodies such as the National Academies and the top scientific societies, lack influence within the Bush administration.

Lane was one of more than 150 top scientists to sign a petition in February 2004 that accused the administration of "misrepresenting or suppressing scientific knowledge" (see *Nature* 427, 663; 2004). The statement was accompanied by a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), a Boston-based environmental watchdog, which alleged that administration officials had altered or concealed scientific reports that were in conflict with administration policies. In the run up to the election, Lane was one of



Neal Lane believes that researchers can build a better relationship with Bush's new cabinet.

a group of prominent scientists to campaign against Bush on university campuses (see *Nature* 430, 595; 2004).

With the election over, Lane now says that it is time to start afresh with administration officials. He believes that talking to them early on may help avoid the skewing of science for political reasons. "A lot will depend on these new people taking over the agencies," he says. "It seems to me that it wouldn't hurt for Bush administration officials and representatives from the scientific community to meet."

But the election campaign has left scientists and administration officials at logger-

heads, and some observers wonder if this will cause relations between them to deteriorate further. According to Robert Walker, a Washington-based lobbyist and former Republican chairman of the House Committee on Science, administration officials were deeply stung by statements in the UCS report that a senior adviser in the president's Office of Science and Technology Policy lacked adequate scientific training. "In politics, it becomes very difficult to work with people who attack you personally," Walker says.

And scientists in some disciplines, at least, still think their views are being repressed by the administration. According to a UCS survey of scientists working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service released on 9 February, 42% of the 414 respondents think that they cannot raise "concerns about the biological needs of species and habitats without fear of retaliation". Kurt Gottfried, a physicist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and chairman of the UCS, says that the report clearly shows the mistrust between scientists and the Bush administration, and predicts that more surveys being planned by the UCS will give similar results.

Henry Kelly, head of the Washington-based Federation of American Scientists, and an anti-Bush campaigner during the election, also predicts that disputes will continue to rage between scientists and the Bush administration. "This is not a fight that the country can afford," he says. Walker agrees: "I don't think this will fade away," he says. ■

Sanctions agreed over teenager's gene-therapy death

Erika Check, Washington

Three clinical researchers are to face restrictions on their work for their part in a gene-therapy trial that led to a teenager's death in 1999. An out-of-court settlement, under which their employers will pay fines of \$1 million, was announced on 11 February. It marks the end of a five-year investigation by the US Department of Justice into the death in 1999 of 18-year-old Jesse Gelsinger in the gene-therapy trial.

Under the terms of the settlement, James Wilson, who led the trial at the University of Pennsylvania, is required to undergo retraining in the conduct of trials on human subjects before he can work with them again.

Wilson hasn't worked with human subjects since January 2000 — four months after Gelsinger died in the trial, which used a modified virus to deliver a gene that was intended to produce a liver enzyme that was deficient. According to an investigation by

the university, Gelsinger died from an immune reaction to the adenovirus vector. The widely publicized case led to congressional hearings and to tighter rules on the conduct of clinical trials.

The settlement also places restrictions on the work of Wilson's co-investigators in the gene-therapy trial, Steven Raper, also of the University of Pennsylvania, and Mark Batshaw, of the Children's National Medical Center in Washington. The University of Pennsylvania and the Children's National Medical Center will pay fines totalling \$1 million.

The justice department alleged that the researchers and their institutions made false statements regarding the safety of the trial to the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the institutional review board that oversaw the research.

But the researchers and their institutions state in the settlement that they did nothing

wrong, and that their conduct was "at all times lawful and appropriate".

The terms of the settlement state that a monitor will supervise Wilson's work in humans for three years, and he will be allowed to conduct only one trial at a time. Any of Wilson's animal research that could affect patient safety will also be supervised. If he fulfils the requirements set out in the settlement, Wilson will then be able to conduct unrestricted research in humans in 2010.

In a statement, Wilson said that the settlement would enable him to continue with his laboratory research. But Jesse Gelsinger's father, Paul Gelsinger, says he is disappointed that the settlement did not require Wilson or anyone else to admit responsibility, apologize for their actions, or release documents uncovered by the justice department. "We just want that kind of closure," he says. "Without that, I'm finding it impossible to forgive these guys." ■