

U.S. AGRICULTURE

Farm Bill Gives Agriculture Research A Higher Profile in the Department

Spending on basic agricultural research in the United States could grow significantly thanks to a massive farm bill that Congress approved overwhelmingly last week. The bill also calls for a larger competitive grants program within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). “We view this as a real win,” says Ian Maw, vice president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) in Washington, D.C.

The changes are part of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, a 5-year, \$307 billion measure that preserves massive subsidies for farmers. It renames the department’s major extramural arm, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, as the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The institute is to be headed by a “distinguished scientist” appointed by the president to a 6-year term. The competitive grants portion of the new institute, to be called the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, will replace the National Research Initiative (NRI). Its budget will be authorized at \$700 million a year, \$200 million more than the level for NRI, which actually receives only \$180 million a year.

Supporters of agricultural research hope these changes will be more than cosmetic.

They have long pressed for an entity within USDA analogous to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or the National Science Foundation. Although Congress rejected a proposal from President George W. Bush to combine the department’s intramural and extramural research programs into an office of science (*Science*, 23 February 2007, p. 1073), the legislation seeks to better coordinate USDA’s \$2 billion research portfolio by requiring an annual “roadmap.” It assigns the job to the undersecretary for research, education, and economics, currently Gale Buchanan, former agriculture dean at the University of Georgia.

The arrangement combines the recommendations of a group headed by William Danforth, former chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and a proposal from NASULGC. Danforth calls the measure “a great breakthrough” but adds that “what will really be necessary will be to build competitive funding.” Almost all of NRI’s current budget is spent on “formula-driven” research, says Maw, whereas the new bill designates that 60% must go to basic research. It keeps separate the department’s intramural arm, the Agricultural Research Service.

The NIFA chief would also oversee



Veggie power. Research on specialty crops, such as artichokes, would get more attention in new farm bill.

\$308 million over 5 years for competitive grants in two new areas: organic crops and “specialty crops,” otherwise known as fruits and vegetables. This funding becomes an actual spending level unless Congress explicitly decides otherwise.

Bush says that the bill is too generous on agricultural subsidies. But both houses passed it with veto-proof majorities, and it was expected to become law as early as the end of the week. It would take effect in October 2009.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

RESEARCH FUNDING

Australia’s New Science Budget Gets a Mixed Review

CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA—Two of Australia’s science agencies are shedding jobs and trimming programs to comply with a new national budget that’s both praised and criticized by research leaders. The spending plan announced by the Labor government last week—its first since coming to power in 2007—provides more money for education initiatives, including a \$10.5 billion trust fund for higher education infrastructure, but less for two key players, the nation’s premier science agency, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO). The cuts are troubling, some say, because the government expects to reap a \$20.7 billion surplus over Australia’s next annual budget cycle, which starts 1 July.

The reduction at CSIRO is “a disappoint-

ment,” says Chief Executive Geoff Garrett. Combined with a cut announced previously, it will shrink the agency’s appropriation through the 2008–09 budget cycle by roughly \$15 million, or just over 2%, to \$660 million. “Our aim will obviously be to preserve core capability and the science and research activities that we’re doing, ... but the arithmetic is such that ... there will be some staff losses.” He says CSIRO will benefit from funding for energy technology, water management, and climate change adaptation. But it will probably have to cut its 6350-strong workforce by about 100. ANSTO, meanwhile, is to lose about 80 of its 1009 staff as it deals with rising costs and a cut of about 2.6% from its \$144 million appropriation in the year ending on 30 June 2009.

Australian Academy of Science President Kurt Lambeck welcomed the education invest-

ment fund, saying it will “put us on a path to a world-class higher education and research sector.” He is also enthusiastic about a promise to create new scholarships and 1000 fellowships for midcareer researchers: “It creates opportunities for retaining people in Australia and attracting overseas researchers at a stage when they are most productive.” But climate change research is a different story: An outlay of \$2.2 billion over 5 years for global warming R&D, including clean coal and renewable energy projects, “does not reflect the urgency of the problem,” he says.

Lambeck worries that a series of reviews into the national innovation system and universities could be “used as an excuse for inaction.” Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Kim Carr could not be reached for comment.

—CHERYL JONES

Cheryl Jones is a writer in Canberra, Australia.