

New homes for chemistry tomes

Don't throw out old chemistry books. The Washington, D.C.-based American Chemical Society (ACS) recently completed its first offering through Project Bookshare, a program it developed to find new homes for used chemistry books and journals. "We distributed 26 tons," reports ACS's Joyce C. Torio.

Bookshare accepts journals of any age but limits books to texts 10 years old or less — unless they are established "classics," Torio says. Recipients, limited to 300 pounds each offering, may be any college offering chemistry degrees in a developing country or any U.S. school offering chemistry degrees that does not accept public funds. They choose, on a first-come, first-served basis, from a catalog of donations. Though the literature is free, donors and recipients must pay their own shipping costs. More than 100 institutions in the United States and 14 foreign countries have received offerings.

Persons wishing to donate should not send their holdings to ACS. Instead, send a list itemizing what's being offered. ACS will notify donors of what to send to its Bookshare clearinghouse at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University. For more information, contact Torio at: Department of International Activities, American Chemical Society, 1155 16th St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, or call 202-872-4548.

DOD to set up SDI institute

The Department of Defense (DOD) recently announced that it intends to establish a small "technical support" institute to evaluate technologies being considered for ballistic missile defense as part of its Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Specifically, the institute would plan for technology tests and evaluation; frame issues for SDI's administrators; see that DOD's contractors and researchers coordinate efforts; and maintain a data base on active SDI projects and capabilities.

In a May 30 assessment of the proposal, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress identified several concerns. For example, say the report's authors, these small, federally funded research and development centers, while greatly influencing the direction of millions if not billions of dollars worth of research, development and engineering within their funding agencies, tend to be "insulated from certain aspects of a competitive environment, such as peer review and incentives for increasing cost-efficiency." CRS authors Cosmo Di Maggio and Michael E. Davey also consider it "doubtful" that any single organization can acquire the number of top analysts — across the breadth of disciplines SDI spans — for this institute to perform its stated functions.

SDI: At what cost?

An open letter to Congress criticizing the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), signed by more than 1,600 scientists and engineers — all current or former employees of federal laboratories or of defense contractors — was handed to Senators J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.) and Daniel J. Evans (R-Wash.) on June 19. The letter charged that SDI's stated goal — to render nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete — is not feasible in the foreseeable future and risks jeopardizing arms control negotiations. However, it is the program's cost, in terms of both researchers and dollars, that the researchers appeared to object to most.

Explains Nobel Prize-winning physicist Robert Wilson, head of radio physics at AT&T Bell Laboratories in Holmdel, N.J., and one of the signers, "We're all in favor of a very strong national defense. And we think that our proposal will strengthen that defense, not weaken it." According to Pierre Hohenberg, head of theoretical physics at AT&T Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, N.J., the signers of this letter don't want the United States to abandon SDI. Rather, "we are asking for a scaledown" in its size, to a level appropriate to exploratory research, not

development, he says.

The scientists didn't recommend a specific dollar value for that scaledown. However, says group organizer Daniel Fisher, also of the Murray Hill laboratory, one should compare the administration's SDI budget request of \$4.8 billion for the coming fiscal year with, for example, what the administration would offer the National Science Foundation — \$1.5 billion. Considering that the foundation is one of the federal government's largest supporters of basic research in the civilian sector, Fisher believes SDI's current research budget of \$2.75 billion "is more than certainly adequate."

This is not the first such plea from researchers to reevaluate government spending on SDI. One month earlier a group of more than 6,900 academic physicists, mathematicians and engineers — a group that includes 57 percent of the combined faculties of the 20 top physics departments in the United States — pledged to boycott SDI funds. The signatories are not necessarily opposed to DOD support. According to a 28-page background paper circulated with their SDI-boycott pledge, many of the faculty members who signed "ordinarily accept other types of military funding." David Wright, an organizer of the academic SDI boycott and a physicist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, says studies into ballistic-missile defense technologies per se are not the issue. It's SDI's size, he says, and its "undeliverable" goal of erecting a protective shield over the United States.

Many members of Congress are also becoming skeptical of the program's costs. On May 13, a group of 44 senators signed a letter asking the Committee on Armed Services to hold SDI's budget for next year to 3 percent real growth over fiscal year 1986 spending. When the Senate committee voted on June 20, it recommended a 31 percent increase — far less than the 75 percent growth President Reagan had asked for. The House Armed Services Committee is now considering a 24 percent increase for the program.

In a nonclassified version of DOD's report to Congress on SDI, issued June 26, the agency states that "congressional budget reductions have had an adverse impact on SDI research and forced major program changes." Specifically, the report says, "We have been forced to reduce the effort on certain major technologies such as space-based lasers [SN: 2/15/86, p. 106] prematurely." This may significantly increase program risk, delay completion of research investigations and increase total program costs, according to Lieut. Gen. James Abrahamson, who directs the SDI program and testified before Congress last week.

FDA aflatoxin policy upheld

A June 17 ruling by the Supreme Court upholds Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rules to regulate food "adulterants." The case involved aflatoxin, a potent poison produced by a mold, which naturally contaminates many crops. For such unavoidable contaminants, FDA has published either "tolerance levels," strict ceilings on allowed contamination; or "action levels," red-flag levels above which the agency might take action. Two public-interest groups sued FDA, charging that it violated the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act by setting only an action level for the toxin, rather than a strict tolerance.

In an 8-to-1 decision, the high court ruled that the act's wording on this issue is grammatically open to different interpretations: one that makes establishing a tolerance level mandatory for any toxic adulterant, the other that puts creation of such a tolerance at the agency's discretion. And, the court said, "We find the FDA's interpretation of [the disputed clause] to be sufficiently rational to preclude a court from substituting its [or the plaintiffs'] judgment for that of the FDA."