

# Science & Society

## Federal labs accused of budget waste

U.S. taxpayers provide more than \$10 billion in support of the nation's 39 federally funded but privately operated research and development centers. These labs, which net an estimated 10 percent of all federal R&D funds, have said, "Trust us, we'll spend your money wisely," says Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.). But a report issued July 8 by the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, which Levin chairs, contends that the labs have operated for years under "an inadequate, inconsistent patchwork of federal cost, accounting, and auditing controls." The result, Levin asserts, "has been excellent research, but at an unacceptable cost . . . the wasteful or inappropriate use of millions of federal dollars."

Among examples cited in the 67-page report:

- Lawrence Livermore (Calif.) National Laboratory did not seek competitive bids before leasing 58 vehicles from the University of California, which runs the lab. Livermore paid \$150,000 in administrative costs, charges that continued even after the cars had been paid off and the university owned them.
- Livermore scientists used purchasing systems for weapons research to order more than \$595,000 worth of personal mementos. When the Energy Department balked at footing the bill, the University of California sued. Litigation is in progress.
- Los Alamos (N.M.) National Laboratory overspent its \$34 million limit on discretionary research by \$97 million in fiscal years 1986 and 1987. "Due to inadequate controls and [Energy Department] oversight," states the report, Argonne (Ill.) National Laboratory exceeded its funding limits over one three-year span — but only by \$5 million.
- Air Force program managers approved its contractor-operated labs to perform 18 projects without determining

whether Air Force personnel or outside contractors could do the work less expensively. The cost: "nearly \$1 million more than necessary."

The new report offers 10 accounting recommendations to lower the labs' costs and to improve their auditing.

## A cite for sore ears

The Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS), a panel that advises U.S. agencies on procedural matters, finds the nation's primary noise-abatement program unique. ACUS reports in the July 8 Federal Register that this all-but-comatose Environmental Protection Agency program appears to represent the only instance "where Congress has eliminated the funding for an ongoing program that preempts state and local [regulatory] actions — without also ending the statutory authorization for that program or addressing the preemptive effect of existing regulations."

The Reagan administration's 1981 decision to strip all funds from EPA's noise-control program placed the Noise Control Act of 1972 in limbo (SN: 8/17/91, p.100). For instance, it left several proposed noise-control standards pending for a decade.

In its report, ACUS recommends that EPA analyze the effects of having few noise regulations on the books and virtually no means for any other government agency to step in and fill the gap. After EPA advises the appropriate congressional committees on its findings, ACUS recommends that Congress either repeal the noise act or delegate specific noise-control responsibilities to EPA — and earmark funds for them. ACUS expects to reiterate these recommendations in letters to EPA and Congress within the next week or two.

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