

NIH fraud busters get new assignments

From fraud busting to churning out government prose: That's certainly not the career move Walter W. Stewart had in mind. But that's exactly what National Institutes of Health (NIH) officials ordered him to do early this month.

Stewart and his colleague Ned Feder are best known for their investigative role in a number of scientific fraud cases, including the dispute over a 1986 scientific paper on the immune system (SN: 3/31/90, p.200). More recently, the duo devised a computer software program that compares two samples of text and identifies phrases that crop up in both samples. The program can be used to look for plagiarism.

Until last spring, both scientists had conducted their fraud and misconduct investigations out of a laboratory on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Md. However, on April 9, NIH officials told the pair not to discuss their investigations on government time and informed them that they would be reassigned to jobs more in keeping with the mission of NIH.

Recently, the agency came up with a new position for Stewart. In a letter dated Oct. 1, L. Earl Laurence, acting deputy director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), describes Stewart's new job.

"I have concluded that it would be appropriate for you to be reassigned as a Program Analyst . . . where you will work on various science-writing projects."

It's no surprise that Stewart objects to that move. "Rewriting NIDDK prose is a strange job to give to a person who is an expert on plagiarism," he says in an Oct. 3 memorandum to Laurence. Meanwhile, Feder has also been reassigned: He's now a grants administrator for NIDDK.

Stewart and Feder have proposed an alternative job description: They want to set up an office that would help scientists who blow the whistle on fraud or misconduct.

This tug-of-war has attracted the attention of several members of Congress, including Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), the chairman of the House Government Operations Committee. In a recent press release, Conyers outlined his "deep concern" over the forced reassignment of Stewart and Feder.

"This NIH action has the appearance of retaliation," says the release. "When those in government who dare to expose misconduct and waste are summarily reassigned, it can only have a chilling effect on all whistle-blower activity."

Partners urged for biological survey

Species are a bit like novels. Some plants and animals, like bestsellers, are well known: Countless scientists have documented their habits and whereabouts. But about half of the roughly 650,000 species in the United States are still unpublished manuscripts waiting to be discovered, says Peter H. Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis.

In setting up a National Biological Survey, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt faces the challenges of dealing with these two extremes, says Raven, who headed a National Research Council (NRC) committee asked to provide Babbitt advice about the survey. Slated to be a new entity within Interior, the survey should not only seek out the unknown species, but it should also compile and make accessible what's known about the nation's biological resources, the NRC panel concluded.

The U.S. government first initiated a national biological survey a century ago, charging the Agriculture Department with taking a census of U.S. plants and animals. The Interior Department took over this task in 1939, but the survey never got off the ground there. Then Babbitt announced last February his intention of resurrecting the effort. He hopes the survey will provide well-researched information about the nation's biological resources, information that will help policy makers and environmentalists reach compromises about land use, he told

Congress in September.

Though housed at Interior, the survey needs to reach out to other agencies, look beyond the department when setting goals, and be more than a one-time inventory, says Raven.

The NRC committee urged the department to set up a National Partnership for Biological Survey (NPBS), which would coordinate survey-type activities by all federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as museums, universities, and private organizations.

"What we're calling for is an enhanced cooperation of agencies [and organizations] that are working on this problem already," says Raven. "We're not calling for a complex [new] organization to be built."

This cooperative would come up with standards that would allow the various groups involved to share information easily and to avoid duplication of effort. "It would be an ongoing partnership that would function indefinitely," adds Raven.

In addition, urges the NRC report, the survey should provide many kinds of users with access to data about species and about ecosystems through a computerized network, the National Biotic Resource Information System. The NRC panel hopes the system will include databases located in museums, university collections, state survey departments, even company archives. "We specifically do not recommend the establishment of one major, integrated database," Raven notes.

The report, "A Biological Survey for the Nation," concluded that the survey should provide the information needed to find ways to preserve the nation's diversity of plants and animals (see p. 248) and to guarantee that ecosystems function well enough to supply water, to control floods and erosion, and to modulate climate. Other research should address the impact of human development, land use, agriculture, and mining. The committee called for studies in sustainable management of biological resources, for the identification of economically useful products from plants and animals, and for improved techniques for restoring damaged environments.

Babbitt has already set in motion steps to create an NBS, and Raven noted that other agencies, such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the Forest Service, already work with Interior personnel on some projects. Over the next five years, however, these partnerships should expand and databases should go on-line, the report suggested.

Exotic species prove costly immigrants

Lady Liberty's welcoming beacon doesn't shine for about 4,500 plant and animal foreigners now settled on U.S. soil. Some of these nonindigenous species, such as the African honeybee, sneaked across U.S. borders; some arrived as stowaways on ships (SN: 7/25/92, p.56).

Others had help. "Some of the most harmful NIS [non-indigenous species] — like kudzu, water hyacinth, and feral goats — were imported intentionally, with their negative effects unanticipated or underestimated," notes an Oct. 5 report by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), a congressional research group. At least 36 of the 300 weeds in the western United States were once cultivated as crops or in gardens. And escaped bait or aquarium fish now populate U.S. waterways.

Already this century, 79 such interlopers have caused at least \$97 billion in damages, while 15 new ones could exact another \$134 billion in future economic losses, according to the report. Some 205 new species have settled in this country since 1980, says OTA.

The report concludes that the first line of defense — screening procedures — could never intercept all unwanted organisms, adding that rapid identification and eradication offer the best chances of stopping these intruders.