

Put Democracy Into R&D

 csmonitor.com/1995/1030/30191.html

1995

All citizens, not just corporations and generals, should have a say in federal science and technology decisions

By Richard E. Sclove. Richard E. Sclove, executive director of the Loka Institute in Amherst, Mass., is the author of "Democracy and Technology" (New York Guilford Press). October 30, 1995

RECENTLY we celebrated America's newest Nobel laureate scientists, among them two chemists who pioneered research into depletion of the earth's ozone layer. Yet the day the awards were announced, Congress resumed its systematic bid to deplete federal funding for nonmilitary research and development, including punching a 32 percent hole in the budget for studies on ozone destruction and other global environmental change. This season's R&D budget battles and congressional votes forecast an alarming shift in America's science and technology climate.

Imagine a future in which funds for vital civilian research are depleted 35 percent over the next five years, while heedless spending on B-2 bombers and Star Wars boondoggles continues. Energy conservation, renewable energy development, and environmental research suffer severe damage, while the EPA is prohibited from enforcing environmental laws. In an increasingly hostile climate, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) burns up, and attempts to make science and technology policy responsive to the public are driven underground.

The information superhighway opens express lanes for advertising and exporting jobs to low-wage countries, but no on-ramps for the poor. Workplace hazards go uninvestigated; corporations are licensed to sell defective products; student loans are undermined; the unemployed are discouraged from learning new skills.

Unfortunately, like ozone destruction itself, this isn't just a doomsday scenario. It represents Congress's real-world science and technology policy in bills now working their way toward the president's desk. OTA has closed its doors already, but the rest of these outcomes are not yet a fait accompli. The administration has threatened to veto the House budget proposal to cut next year's civilian-oriented research 7.9 percent (compared with the Pentagon's 5.9 percent R&D hike).

But even if Mr. Clinton vetoes, the underlying problem will remain. The current crisis over

R&D priorities and funding would never have developed had there been an ongoing national debate on science and technology policy. Recent decisions in Congress reflect the traditional lack of such debate. A rational science and technology policy would require allowing Americans from all walks of life a role in decisions that profoundly affect them.

Sound absurd? Think citizens who can't even program their VCRs couldn't possibly grasp complex scientific issues? In other industrialized countries they already do. Lay people dominate Sweden's respected Council for Planning and Coordination of Research. British, Danish, and Dutch citizens cross-examine experts, deliberate among themselves, and report their findings on science and technology policies at national press conferences. In Japan, Germany, and Scandinavia, workers and consumers help develop new technologies and consumer products.

But in the US the tendency to exclude citizens and decree science and technology decisions from on high runs deep. Today's Congress may have surpassed its predecessors in welcoming corporate lobbyists as de facto committee members, but the truth is both Democrats and Republicans customarily exclude all but three elite groups from science and technology policymaking: business leaders, military brass, and expert researchers.

It's time to democratize science and technology in America, to build public consensus on ozone depletion and other pressing environmental and socio-technological issues. Otherwise we cede the control of technology to short-term corporate interests and politicized defense agendas, at the expense of wider scientific interests, the environment, education, employment, and living standards.

Here are some practical first steps Washington can take right now:

- r End the exclusion of public-interest groups, workers, and community representatives from federal science and technology advisory boards and congressional hearings.

- r Empanel groups of everyday citizens to attend background briefings and evaluate alternative science and technology policies, as is done in other industrialized countries.

- r Use existing corporate R&D tax credits to reward employers that involve workers, public-interest groups, and community representatives in their R&D and strategic planning decisions.

- r Help fill the vacuum left when OTA was abolished by allocating a small portion of next year's federal R&D expenditure to new community-based technology assessment programs.

The current budget endgame and other partisan struggles between the president and Congress should not preclude such cost-free measures for advancing the common good. "Change" was the campaign slogan for both the Clinton administration and the Gingrich Congress. But fiddling with science policy while the environment burns and our economic and social future darkens is hardly the change voters had in mind. We can change the climate in our democracy by giving citizens a say in fundamental science and technology decisions that shape their lives.

