

Chemists Want NIH to Curtail Database

The American Chemical Society (ACS) wants the U.S. government to shut down a free database that it says duplicates the society's fee-based Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS). Government officials defend the site, called PubChem, saying the two serve different purposes and will complement, rather than compete with, each other. But ACS officials are hoping to convince Congress to stop PubChem unless the government scales it back.

PubChem was launched last fall by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, as a free storehouse of data on small organic molecules. It is a component of the Molecular Libraries Initiative, which is a part of NIH Director Elias Zerhouni's road map for translating biomedical research. So far, PubChem includes information on 650,000 compounds, such as structures and biological assays, as well as links to PubMed, NIH's free biomedical abstracts database. It will grow to include data from the Molecular Libraries centers, which aim to screen thousands of molecules for biological activity. NIH expects basic researchers to use PubChem to identify chemicals they can use to



Boiling point. ACS's Madeleine Jacobs says NIH's PubChem goes too far.

explore how genes and cells work.

But ACS claims PubChem goes far beyond a chemical probes database. It is, ACS says, a smaller version of CAS, which employs more than 1200 people in Columbus, Ohio, and makes a significant contribution to the society's \$317 million in annual revenue from publications. Institutional subscribers receive data on 25 million chemicals, including summaries written by CAS experts and links to chemistry journal abstracts. Like CAS, PubChem assigns each chemical a unique identifying number, and until a few weeks ago, the sites even looked

quite similar, says ACS Chief Executive Officer Madeleine Jacobs. Claiming that PubChem could wipe out CAS, Jacobs argues that NIH should abide by its stated mission of storing only data from the Molecular Libraries Initiative and other NIH-funded research.

NIH officials counter that PubChem

indexes a set of biomedical journals that overlaps only slightly with those CAS indexes and, unlike CAS, does not provide curated information on patents or reactions. "They have a vast amount of information that PubChem would never dream of including," says Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute. PubChem's focus on biological information such as protein structures and toxicology is complementary, he says. NIH has offered to link entries in PubChem to CAS, but ACS says that wouldn't help.

ACS has enlisted Ohio's governor, Republican Bob Taft, as well as the state's congressional delegation to push its case. The legislators sent a letter on 8 March to Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt arguing that PubChem could pose "direct and unfair competition" with CAS. The lawmakers compare it to PubScience, a Department of Energy abstracts database that was shut down in 2002 after House appropriators decided it violated rules prohibiting the government from duplicating private services. ACS was part of that lobbying campaign.

NIH officials are worried that PubChem could suffer the same fate and hope to make their case this month to Senator Mike Dewine (R-OH). Jacobs, for her part, wants NIH to "stick to its mission" and cut back the scope of PubChem. If not, she promises "to bring to bear all of our influence and resources."
—JOCELYN KAISER

EUROPEAN POLICY

Panel Gives Thumbs-Down to European Institute of Technology

BERLIN—Efforts to create a European Institute of Technology (EIT) to compete with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) could do more harm than good to science in Europe, an advisory panel told the European Commission last week. The idea for a so-called EIT was proposed in February as part of the relaunch of the so-called Lisbon strategy, designed to boost Europe's flagging economy. The strategy highlights research as a catalyst for economic growth, and commission president José Manuel Barroso proposed that the European Union establish an Institute of Technology with MIT as its model.

Barroso has stumped for the idea in several major speeches, once suggesting that it might be located in Poland, one of the E.U.'s newest members. Although researchers have been largely skeptical, the EIT has gained momentum in some political circles. A group of European Parliament members even suggested a possible campus: their Par-

liament building in Strasbourg, France—one of two sites where the Parliament sits every month. Many parliamentarians would be happy to give up the building and the trouble of maintaining two home sites.

But on 27 April, the European Research Advisory Board (EURAB), a group of scientists that counsels the commission on policy matters, recommended that it shelve the idea. "As much as we would like to see an EIT come into existence in Europe, we are wary that it cannot be created top-down," the panel says in its statement. "An EIT must grow bottom-up from existing research communities."

Instead, it says, the planned European Research Council (ERC), a body to fund basic research, should be given full support to prompt the kind of competition that helps shape top institutions such as MIT. The ERC—originally proposed by a grass-roots movement of European scientists—was part of the commission's proposal for the €70 bil-

lion (\$90 billion) 7th Framework program (*Science*, 15 April, p. 342), but its exact funding and structure are still unclear.

E.U. research spokesperson Antonia Mochan says the commission is exploring the EIT proposal. Although it has not ruled out starting a new institution, she says, both research commissioner Janez Potočnik and education commissioner Ján Figel' have said that perhaps a network of "centers of excellence" across Europe "would be the most relevant way to deal with this issue."

But even such a network worries the advisory panel members. "Our point is that [the institute] would distract from the ERC," says EURAB chair Helga Nowotny of the Vienna Science Center. The panel decided to issue the statement after hearing of increased support for the idea among politicians, she says: "Every science minister from Poland to Portugal wants to host an EIT."

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

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