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### NEW EXTRAMURAL RESEARCH PROPOSED IN USDA BUDGET

New emphasis will be placed on four areas of basic research aimed at increasing food production and improving human nutrition if Congress approves the program included in the USDA budget for fiscal year 1978. The budget proposes \$27.6 million for FY 1978 to support studies in photosynthesis, biological nitrogen fixation, cellular and genetic engineering of plants, and biological stress on plants.

Designed to answer some of the criticisms that have been directed at agricultural research in recent years, the program will award extramural research grants for a three- to five-year period. Proposals are invited from any scientists with professional competence and access to facilities to conduct the work; selection of proposals will be based on ratings by peer review panels, similar to the procedure followed at NIH and NSF. Scientists employed by the Agricultural Research Service and the state agricultural experiment stations are free to submit proposals as are scientists in public and private universities, other federal agencies, and private research institutions. "The intent of the Department is to attract the very best scientists wherever they are to contribute to the advancement of these important basic research areas," Thomas S. Ronnigen, associate administrator of the Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS), assured *BioScience* readers.

The four areas of research were selected on the basis of numerous reports by various study groups describing them as categories where significant progress might be expected. In photosynthesis the emphasis will be on understanding the basic process and how to increase its efficiency. The goal of research in nitrogen fixation will be to increase the ability of food crops to fix more nitrogen themselves and to reduce dependency on commercial fertilizers. With studies in cellular and genetic manipulation the purpose will be to improve resistance to pests, diseases, and climatic fluctuations and to enhance nutritional content of foods. This area dovetails with experiments to learn ways to help plants respond to biological stress, which can come from pests, weeds, or diseases.

Policy guidance for the program will come from a group appointed to represent the various interests in agricultural research, namely, USDA, universities and private research groups, National Academy of Sciences, NIH, and NSF. The program will be administered by a new Office of Mission-Oriented Basic Research Grants within the CSRS. A program director will head the office with the assistance of grant managers, who will be responsible for each research area.

Many administrative details still need to be worked out. Congress may dictate some directives when it reviews the USDA budget, and the new Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland may also have some recommendations. Comments from the scientific community also are welcome. "We will be soliciting advice from scientists and science administrators outside the agricultural research system," Ronnigen said.

Until further details are ready to be announced to potential participants, CSRS suggests that persons seeking more information get in touch with R. J. Aldrich, CSRS Administrator, or T. W. Edminister, Administrator of the Agricultural Research Service.