AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Centers Embrace an Alliance But Remain Wary of a Merger

TOKYO AND NEW DELHI—The developing world’s two premier agricultural research organizations have agreed to join forces on selected scientific projects. But the leaders of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Baños, the Philippines, and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), near Mexico City, rejected an outside recommendation to merge their administrative structures.

“A cynic could say that there is not much new” in this agreement, says Alex McCalla, professor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of California, Davis, and chair of the CIMMYT board of directors. “Still, this is a set of commitments that goes way beyond anything these two centers have done before.”

The two centers are part of a global network of 16 institutions working on agricultural challenges in the developing world. The impetus for closer cooperation comes from recent research showing that the major cereals share many genes. Last year the two centers asked the Rockefeller Foundation to study various organizational options, including a full merger (Science, 27 February 2004, p. 1281). Meeting earlier this month in Shanghai, the centers’ two boards of directors accepted the foundation’s suggestion to begin four joint research programs immediately and to pool support services related to issues such as intellectual-property rights, biosafety, and scientific publishing.

But governance issues proved more difficult. All agree that a complete merger wouldn’t work. “Dissolving two existing international institutions and replacing them with a new one raised a host of very difficult legal and procedural problems,” says Gary Toenniessen, a Rockefeller Foundation official and coordinator for the working group. The working group and the boards also agreed that the research projects should have a single leader and a unified budget. But the boards balked at putting the two centers under a single director-general and a single board of directors, as the foundation’s working group had suggested.

McCalla says both boards felt that having a single director-general “was tantamount to a merger” and, thus, “premature.” Instead, the boards decided to set up two committees, one to oversee the joint programs and one to explore common management. They also agreed to have two members sit on both boards. “Depending on the performance of these joint programs, we may take a second step toward greater cooperation,” says Keijiro Otsuka, an agricultural economist at the Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development in Tokyo and chair of the IRRI board.

Gurdev Khush, formerly chief breeder at IRRI and now a professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis, calls the alliance “a welcome development.” He sees the joint work on intensive rice-wheat and rice-maize crop production systems, crop databases for breeders and farmers, and how crops can adapt to climate change as a step in the right direction. Toenniessen agrees, but adds, “We wish they would have gone further.”

—DENNIS NORMILE

With reporting by Pallava Bagla.

NASA BUDGET

Hubble, Other Programs Face Cuts in 2006

The budget ax is about to fall on several NASA science programs. Despite President George W. Bush’s decision to seek a small boost in the agency’s $16.2 billion budget in 2006, sources say that the victims this year and next will include Mars data programs, aeronautics research, and the Hubble Space Telescope. The cuts, certain to be controversial, are part of the space agency’s 2005 spending plan as well as the 2006 request that the president will send to Congress on 7 February.

The White House’s priorities for the space agency include returning the shuttle to flight, developing new human exploration technologies, and finishing the space station. Those programs will eat up the bulk of the increases in the president’s request, say sources, and starve several other activities. For example, NASA and the White House have decided to let the aging Hubble telescope fall into the Pacific Ocean, say Administration sources, instead of mounting a servicing mission involving either robots or astronauts arriving via the shuttle. But some lawmakers have already warned the White House that they will oppose the decision not to return to Hubble to extend its life.

Although the fight over Hubble will likely produce the most fireworks on Capitol Hill, space agency managers are quietly making significant cuts this year to other science programs to cope with hundreds of millions of dollars in congressional earmarks as well as the return-to-flight costs for the shuttle. For example, NASA plans to severely curtail spending for new technologies devoted to science missions such as information systems designed to improve data return from future robotic Mars missions, Earth science probes, and the upcoming Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy flight, according to Administration sources. Those technologies would improve autonomy and increase the number of measurements that can be made during NASA missions. The cuts, which will be made by the exploration directorate, may surpass $30 million.

Despite the budget squeeze, NASA managers are working hard to salvage as many science programs as possible by delaying those with later starting dates. One prime example of that strategy is the Beyond Einstein program, which was scheduled for the next decade. Sources say that the president’s new budget will pledge to limit the damage to science programs inflicted by spending on human space flight. That pledge will be sorely tested, however, during the upcoming budget battles.

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