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## Institute needed to aid environmental research



The U.S. government spends nearly \$3.1 billion annually on environmental research. This money is distributed to more than 20 agencies, each with its own mission and agenda. A recent report by the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology and Government described the present system of federal environmental research as "a piecemeal collection of laboratories and programs scattered across more than a dozen agencies and departments, created to address problems and priorities of the past."

Research on important environmental issues is often incomplete because of a lack of coordination between agencies and the constraints imposed by agency missions on the types of research they can conduct. Even worse, some research projects are duplicated because of a lack of coordination.

No agency is responsible for coordinating and conducting environmental research. More and more organizations, scientists and decision makers are coming to the conclusion that a National Institutes for the Environment, or NIE, needs to be formed.

The Committee for the NIE, a group of more than 6,000 scientists, educators and citizens, has proposed the new agency to "improve the scientific basis for making decisions on environmental issues."

This committee envisions four

main goals for the NIE:

**Research** Increase scientific understanding of environmental issues by supporting credible, problem-focused research.

**Assessment** The NIE would have a Center for Environmental Issues. Periodic assessments would determine the extent of knowledge about particular issues, the implications for decision makers and the need for additional research.

**Information** The NIE would facilitate and expand access to environmental information by establishing a National Library for the Environment that would provide public access to environmental information from a variety of sources.

**Education and training** The NIE would strengthen the nation's capacity to address environmental issues by sponsoring higher education and training programs.

The proposed NIE is designed to enhance coordination and efficiency while minimizing additional bureaucracy. For instance, it would not set up its own labs and teams of researchers. Instead, the NIE would fund research outside of the institute.

"We want the NIE to be almost exclusively extramural," explains Peter Saundry, executive director of the committee. "We are not calling for any new research lab. The federal government has plenty of research labs. We are calling for funds for ex-

tramural research. And let everyone compete for them. Let federal labs compete for them; let academic researchers compete for them; and let private-sector research compete for them."

In fact, about the only NIE programs that couldn't be exclusively extramural are the proposed National Library for the Environment and the Center for Environmental Assessment.

Money for the NIE would come entirely from existing federal dollars for defense research and development.

"The federal government spends about \$72 billion annually on research and development," Saundry said, adding that the Clinton administration has called for more of that money to go toward civilian research and development.

On Aug. 6, Reps. George Brown, D-Calif., and James Saxton, R-N.J., introduced a House bill that would create an NIE. Brown is chairman of the Science, Space and Technology Committee, and Saxton is a member of the Subcommittee on Environmental and Natural Resources of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee. The bill already has been co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of 40 representatives and is scheduled for public hearings in November.

"The next step is to convince decision makers that an NIE would help them make informed decisions on critical environmental issues," Saxton said. "Credible scientific results and information can improve regulatory and management decisions, ultimately affecting the health of the environment and the welfare and economic security of future generations."