

Senate Hearing on Tiny, Targeted

By John Schwartz
Washington Post Staff Writer

It was supposed to be a committee hearing, but it had more the mood of a wake.

The Senate Appropriations subcommittee on the legislative branch heard testimony yesterday on the fate of the Office of Technology Assessment, Congress's own research agency for science and technology issues—and a Republican target for elimination. Both the House and the Senate budget resolutions call for abolishing the OTA, and the tiny inside-the-Beltway agency has few constituents to fight for its survival.

Little known outside Washington, the OTA produces reports at the request of Congress on a broad range of topics, including the proper direction of the space program, proliferation of nuclear weaponry, and technologies that would help identify the origins of bombs.

During fiscal 1994, OTA delivered 51 publications to Congress, testified 38 times before congressional committees and regularly provided informal responses to lawmakers' telephone inquiries.

With just 143 full-time employees and a \$22-million budget, OTA makes a very small target, especially at a time when whole Cabinet agencies are on the chopping block. Supporters of OTA and the General Accounting Office—another congressional body, slated for a 25 percent budget cut by Republican lawmakers—say both agencies produce the kind of information that helps Congress save money in the long run. Charles Peters, editor in chief of the Washington Monthly, said in an interview that Republicans especially should be holding on to agencies like GAO and OTA, which provide the kind of data budget-cutters need to make wise choices. "To cut programs like GAO or the OTA, that tell you what's silly

THE WASHINGTON POST

SATURDAY, MAY 27, 1995 A9

Technology Agency Takes on Funereal Tone

and what works and what doesn't work—that's just plain crazy," he said.

In an interview, one OTA staffer suggested that in the midst of deep cuts in so many branches of the government, "They [members of Congress] had to come up with something in their own back yard" to say, "see, we're doing it to ourselves."

At the hearing yesterday, senators speaking up for the OTA said it has been a nonpartisan guide through the dizzyingly complex issues that lawmakers must deal with—and warned that eliminating it will make the Congress a dumber place.

"I think of OTA as our source of objective counsel," said Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa)—"a level playing field for all interests in science and technology." Grassley, like fellow members of the OTA's governing board Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), tried to convince subcom-

mittee Chairman Connie Mack (R-Fla.) that the agency should be saved.

Mack told OTA Director Roger C. Herdman, "I am not here attacking the quality of the work or the people you have in your organization." He nonetheless said that the agency had lost its focus on technology issues, wandering off into such topics as health care reform, and was generating many reports that duplicated the work of other agencies and organizations. Herdman defended the agency's reports; the health care study, he said, provided valuable analysis of the assumptions that underlay economic projections used by different organizations in their widely varying estimates of the cost of health care reform.

Herdman also said the agency has drawn up an action plan that calls for refocusing on technology issues and proposed a plan that would cut the agency's budget by approximately 30 percent. Mack pointedly stated that the Sen-

ate budget resolution passed late Thursday called for \$200 million in legislative branch cuts, and that both House and Senate budget resolutions have called for OTA's elimination.

In an interview following the OTA testimony, Mack denied that his comments meant that the dissolution of the OTA was a foregone conclusion. "I wouldn't go that far," Mack said, since the agency's funding will be considered in votes at the committee level and on the House and Senate floor.

Asked, however, whether any of the testimony yesterday had changed his mind about the need to abolish the OTA, Mack replied, "No. They're arguments that I've heard before."

"The process isn't over," said Jean K. McDonald, a spokeswoman for the besieged agency. "Deliberations are still going on." Still, a dispirited OTA management sent many staffers home early for the Memorial Day weekend.