

# Prize-Winning Scientists Rally Behind Institute of Standards and Technology

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They are more at home in the rarified world of science than the robust milieu of politics.

But yesterday some of the nation's top scientists left their labs to turn lobbyist for a day in defense of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

Members of the American Physical Society released letters signed by 25 Nobel prize winners and 18 presidents and directors of scientific societies, in what spokesman Michael Lubell described at a news conference as an "unprecedented" show of anger by the ordinarily sedate scientific community.

They were protesting plans that could lead to the elimination or sale of the institute's laboratories. Measurements and standards techniques perfected there, the laureates said, "have been estimated to save the nation billions of dollars annually through their use in industries such as electrical power, semiconductor manufacturing, medical, agricultural, food processing and building materials."

"The loss of these laboratories would be a serious blow to our long-term technological capability and to our national enterprise in basic research," they said.

Under the House appropriations bill that funds the Commerce Department, NIST would receive \$263 million for research in fiscal 1996. Under the Senate bill, funding would be \$222 million. Current funding is \$247 million.

Lubell, a physics professor at City College of the City University of New York, said the scientists' fears for NIST's future stemmed from bills introduced in the House and the Senate in June to abolish the Commerce Department. The bills state that, within 18 months of the department's demise, the NIST labs should be sold to private sector buyers. That would "place their future at extreme risk," said Lubell said.

The latest threat to NIST comes in a bill passed last week by the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee that would eliminate the department and NIST laboratories but

transfer their standards function to a new independent agency.

By failing to mention the research function of the NIST laboratories in that legislation, senators created "great uncertainty about the future of that activity," Lubell said.

Implicit in his remarks was the classic scientist's distaste for political quick hits—a feeling echoed by the scientists who, one by one, delivered presentations that made few concessions to a pre-doctoral audience.

Norman F. Ramsey, Higgins professor of physics emeritus at Harvard, spoke of the lab supported and

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— letter from Nobel laureates

operated by NIST at Boulder, Colo., where researchers have achieved "the coldest temperature in the universe, which is less than two tenths of one millionth of a degree absolute."

His fellow Nobel prize winner, J. Robert Schrieffer, chief scientist at Florida State University's National High Magnetic Field Laboratory, argued that industry could not be trusted to step into the breach. "I strongly believe [industry] will not pick it up," he said.

With true scientific caution, none predicted the odds on winning the battle for congressional hearts and minds.

Richard Herman, dean of the college of computer, math and physical sciences at the University of Maryland, acknowledged that the scientific community was now "in a reactive mode" in part because of the lack of "a consistent [political] presence."

Asked about having to enter the political arena to defend the agency, Ramsey said: "It's a very critical situation, so we have to worry about it."