

Supercomputer access update

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Representatives from the four university supercomputing centers sponsored by the National Science Foundation met September 10 with the government board trying to devise a national policy aimed at restricting access to supercomputers by communist nations, particularly the Soviet bloc.

The meeting was held after the academic community's outcry against the proposed restrictions, which were advanced without university or National Science Foundation input (see *Soft News*, September 1985 *IEEE Software*). Representatives from the centers at Princeton University, the University of Illinois, the University of California at San Diego, and Cornell University held discussions with the Senior Interagency Group on Technology Transfer.

That group's members include undersecretary-level people from the Departments of State, Commerce, Energy, and Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Science Foundation, and the National Security Agency.

The interagency group is charged with monitoring the flow of technology from the US to nations abroad and devising policies to limit or halt any flow considered an advantage, military or otherwise, to "unfriendly" nations such as those in the Soviet bloc.

At the September meeting with university representatives, the government presented its case for restrictions on supercomputer access. The main concern is keeping the Soviets away from the machines, which the Soviets do not have.

Another reason for the proposed limits on access within the US was to put pressure on European allies to improve similar limits against the Soviets, said Arthur Kusinski, assistant general counsel for the National Science Foundation. The interagency group has been negotiating such limits with the Europeans for about two years.

"The universities and the government were not talking," Kusinski said, explaining the academic community's heated reaction. Indeed, the National Science Foundation was also surprised to hear of the limits on supercomputers, including those in the centers it sponsors, he said. The purpose of the centers was to provide common supercomputer access, and the proposed limits at least appear to contradict that purpose.

As it stands now, there are no limits on access. Kusinski expects no proposal to be made until summer or fall 1986. Any proposal would have to be approved by the National Security Council, and then by the president.

One plan being discussed would restrict access to supercomputers by placing limits in the visas of Soviet-bloc researchers. These visa limits would prohibit direct or indirect access to all US supercomputers, Kusinski said. Universities would not be responsible for the enforcement of the visa limits at their facilities, he added.

"We would not accept an edict that occurs without our being involved," said Alfred Brenner, president of the Consortium for Scientific Computing, the Princeton University supercomputer center.

"There appears to be a window of compromise" that continued university-government discussions might lead to regulations acceptable to all parties, Brenner said. On the other hand, he cautioned, "There are lots of possibilities of this falling apart."

The issue is essentially a quantitative one. "Everyone will agree that if one gave away a full year's supercomputer time [about 8000 hours], that would be unhealthy," he explained. "Most reasonable, *responsible* technical people in the government would say five microseconds [of access] is not a problem.

"The question is 'What is the breakpoint between five microseconds and 8000 hours?'" Brenner posed.