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No political interference in US agricultural grants

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Sir— I write on behalf of several former chief scientists in charge of the US Department of Agriculture's National Research Initiative (NRI) competitive grants programme. We wish to clarify part of your Editorial "A chance for growth" (*Nature* 432, 257; 2004).

The Editorial could be interpreted as suggesting that the department's competitive peer-reviewed research programmes are influenced by political interests. Such interests have played a part in dictating the general areas in which to conduct research, but as chief scientists in the competitive programmes area, we did not observe interference with the peer-review process itself.

The budget provided to the agriculture department for the NRI results, of course, from a political process. But the NRI review process is strictly based on scientific peer review with careful attention to conflicts of interest, appropriate representation and so on. The awarding of grants can be fully documented on the basis of rankings provided by the peer-review panels.

The peer-review process has been fair, thorough and equitable. In fact, an external review of the NRI — *National Research Initiative: A Vital Competitive Grants Program in Food, Fiber and Natural-Resources Research*, published by the National Academies Press in 2000 — indicated that its review process was more stringent than those in sister agencies.

It is accurate to say that noncompetitive grants, or earmarks, are commonly mandated by Congress. But these are not to be confused with competitive, peer-reviewed programmes. The Department of Agriculture is a complex agency and Congress dictates the boundaries of its purview.

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