

MISCONDUCT

Duplicate-grant case puts funders under pressure

Critics call for tighter checks to stop researchers being funded twice for the same work.

BY EUGENIE SAMUEL REICH

It sounds like every researcher's dream: two or more agencies are falling over each other to fund your grant proposal.

But for those tempted to accept funding for the same piece of research from more than one agency, grant fraud charges brought by the US authorities on 31 January are a sober warning. The incident has also sparked renewed calls for funding agencies to work harder to avoid grant duplication.

The recent charges were brought against Craig Grimes, who until 2010 was a professor of electrical engineering at Pennsylvania State University. Last month, he pleaded guilty to charges that included accepting grants from the Department of Energy (DOE) and the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to fund the same research on solar conversion of carbon dioxide into hydrocarbons. "It is not a problem to apply for funds for the same research at different funding agencies, but it is illegal to accept and use the funding," says Christine Boesz, a former inspector-general for the NSF. Such duplicate funding is banned in many leading scientific nations. Boesz says that there is no way of knowing how prevalent the problem is, but that cases tend to come to light only if peer reviewers spot similarities in grant applications.

Grimes raised money for his research on carbon dioxide conversion through a 2009 NSF grant, and went on to accept a second grant later in the year from the DOE's Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E), while claiming that he had no other source of funding. Lisa Powers, a spokeswoman for his former university, says that university administrators did question Grimes about having two grants that sounded very similar, but that he assured them there was no overlap. Yet in

a 2010 paper (S. C. Roy *et al.* *ACS Nano* **4**, 1259–1278; 2010) he openly acknowledged both the NSF and ARPA-E for supporting the same work. That year, the DOE inspector-general spotted the similarity between the grants, the NSF began its investigation, and Grimes resigned his university position.

The charges against Grimes also include misappropriating National Institutes of Health funds intended to test a blood sensor in newborn babies. "Due to the pending criminal case, Dr Grimes has no comment other than to say that he is dedicated to his scientific research and is hopeful that he will be able to continue to make progress in his work," says Grimes's attorney,

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Tina Miller of Farrell & Reisinger in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Republicans in the House of Representatives, who criticized ARPA-E in a 24 January hearing for not having sufficient checks in place to prevent duplication with other sources of funding, say the case underscores their concerns. But Paul Tonko (Democrat, New York) commends the agency for its prompt action over the fraud, adding that it "should discourage others from trying to slip something by ARPA-E".

Congressman Paul Broun (Republican, Georgia), however, wonders why ARPA-E didn't notice the duplication before awarding its grant. Both the NSF and the DOE told *Nature* that their agencies take multiple precautions to prevent duplicate funding. The primary protection is to require grant applicants to declare other sources of private or public funding when they apply, which Grimes failed to do. Agencies also expect an applicant to turn

down a grant if it overlaps with another one.

But the additional funding may pose too great a temptation for some researchers, and agencies could take further steps to nip duplicate awards in the bud, says Harold Garner, a bioinformatician at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. In general, agencies do not cross-check federal grants against their own new awards. Garner has developed software that could indicate whether projects being described are the same, and he says that agencies could benefit from using it.

For example, the discovery of duplicated text triggered a 2010 inquiry into electrical engineer Guifang Li of the University of Central Florida in Orlando, who was accused of plagiarizing material from another research group's paper in his grant proposal to the US Air Force. Air Force and NSF investigations subsequently revealed that duplicate text had appeared in successful applications submitted to the Air Force, the Pentagon's research agency DARPA and the NSF. Concluding that this was a case of duplicate funding for the same work, the NSF barred Li from applying for federal funding for two years. It referred his case to the US Department of Justice, which did not prosecute because of the low amounts of money involved, and because there was no proof that Li had criminal intent.

Li says that he disagrees with the NSF's assessment of the case and its conclusion that he broke the rules. Although he submitted partly identical grant proposals to save time, he says, other parts of the proposals differed and would have led to different research projects. But he adds that he is trying to put the episode behind him, and is continuing with his research career.

"It was a unique situation in which everyone wanted to fund" the work, he says. "Basically, I had an idea that everybody loved, and that's the sad part of it." ■



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