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WASHINGTON, D.C.--A congressional subcommittee chaired by Rep. Ray Thornton (D.-Ark.) will begin hearings next Thursday (September 23) to study the effect of federal patent policies on American scientific research.

Almost every federal agency involved in nonmilitary research awards funds to private researchers, but does not allow the researcher to have exclusive patent rights to any new discoveries. The congressman said witnesses in a series of hearings in May criticized that policy, saying some of the nation's best scientists are no longer interested in federal funding.

"Witnesses pointed out in our earlier hearings that when a private research firm accepts a federal grant, it gives up the exclusive rights to any new products developed under that grant," Thornton said. "Instead, the new patent becomes public property and can be used by anyone, including every potential competitor the original inventor has."

As a result, many federally-owned patents are never marketed and "simply mildew on the shelf," Thornton added. Some federal agencies, such as the Energy Research and Development Administration, have the authority to grant exclusive patents to developers for several years, and some witnesses in the earlier hearings contended that all agencies should be given that authority, he said.

(MORE MORE MORE)

The hearings in May were concerned with the relationship between federal research and the national economy, but the need to change federal patent policy was a recurring theme among witnesses. That series of hearings has been editorially acclaimed by Science, a magazine published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Also, a subcommittee publication on the topic has been chosen for use in courses at George Washington University and the U.S. Commerce Department.

"I believe the earlier hearings documented the need for detailed consideration of the relationship between patent policy and scientific research ," Thornton said. "We know that other nations such as Japan, Germany, Britian and Canada have developed programs to encourage research, development and marketing. Foreign countries have overtaken the U.S. in several fields, and we should examine our national policies to be certain that they are still productive."

Nine witnesses from industry and federal agencies are scheduled to testify before Thornton's subcommittee over a five-day period.

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