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They Have Troubles, Too

The reductions, cutbacks, limitations, and stretch-outs that scientists suffer at the hands of the people who prepare the federal budget are well known. There is another side to the coin, however. Scientists give the controllers a hard time as well. Controllers are suffering from an embarrassment of riches, not of money but of projects to spend it on. What the unceasing flow of wonders from science means to the fiscal experts is that one year's appropriation, even if adequate, is not necessarily at the best level for the next year's appropriation. For, as a scientific idea grows through the stages of research and development, so do the costs of advancing it further.

Consider, for example, the history and plans of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Its 1960 budget was pared to the bone by the administration, and the bone then gnawed clean by Congress. Yet, as the directors of the program have warned, this budget is just the beginning of what should be a series of budgets, each considerably larger than its predecessor. The case of the space agency is hardly unique. This is just one of a number of expanding programs, all competing for funds with each other and with a host of new candidates for government support.

The controller's woes run deeper still. Research and development is not just a matter of little acorns growing into mighty oaks. Though scientists hope for a good crop, they do not know for sure of what it will consist. Consequently, projects are difficult to classify, and a set of categories suitable at one time may not be suitable at another. Should one ask, what's in a name, the answer is, a great deal. Projects are administered by departments, bureaus, agencies, and offices. Where a project is placed may well affect, or be affected by, both the interpretation of its purpose and the kind of support it receives.

To continue the illustration from space science, President Eisenhower recently ordered the transfer of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency, which now devotes much of its energy to developing the super-rocket engine Saturn, to the civilian space agency. The order, regarded as sound by many observers, becomes effective next spring, unless opposed by Congress. Designed for space exploration, the engine, with its 1.5 million pounds of thrust as opposed to the 360,000 pounds of thrust of the Atlas intercontinental ballistic missile, has no immediate military use. It is more powerful than it need be to deliver present military payloads. In a few years, however, military applications for the rocket may develop, and aspects of the program may once more be classified as defense expenditures.

The trouble that scientists and fiscal experts make for each other is an annual affair, and this is the season when the struggle quickens. The administration's budget for 1961, now taking final shape, will be presented to Congress when it reconvenes in January. How, then, fares this year's battle? In considering the plight of fiscal experts, we certainly agree that for so fertile a union as that of science and government, planned parenthood is necessary. But with an economy-minded administration entering what will be the last complete year of its record, over-all prospects for research and development are not good. The immediate danger is too much control and too few offspring.—J.T.