Congress Looks Fondly on Science and Technology

With unaccustomed alacrity, Congress has completed work on budgets for most of the federal government's nondefense science agencies for fiscal year (FY) 1984. With a few notable exceptions, it has been even more generous than the Administration in its support for research and development—a reflection of the political appeal of high technology as a widely touted cure for economic ills.

On 29 June—a full 3 months before FY 1984 even begins—Congress sent President Reagan budget bills containing funds for the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the R & D programs of the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Yet to come is the budget bill for the National Institutes of Health.

NSF has emerged from the process with a budget of $1.32 billion, a massive 21 percent increase over current spending levels. Congress went along with most of the Administration's proposals for major increases in NSF's research programs. It did, however, shave a little off the total proposed for physical sciences and engineering—disciplines that the Administration had singled out for an extra large dollop of money. The big change made by Congress was to double NSF's proposed expenditure on science education. The foundation will have $75 million to spend on education next year.

The final budget bill also sets terms for a temporary truce in a battle that has been taking place in the past few months over the division of NSF's research budget. Representatives of liberal arts colleges and other nongraduate institutions have been lobbying hard for a bigger share of NSF's riches, pointing out that their share of the foundation's budget has dropped from about 2 percent in 1968 to 1 percent today. They got a sympathetic reception in the House, where the spread-the-wealth argument has a lot of political appeal, since most members have a liberal arts college in their districts. The House Appropriations Committee decreed that 3 percent of NSF's research budget should go to non-Ph.D-granting institutions. For obvious reasons, the research universities opposed this set-aside, and the Senate refused to support it. The final version of the bill does not require NSF to set aside a portion of its funds, but it does "strongly urge" the foundation to reverse the trend of declining support for nongraduate colleges and directs NSF to produce a progress report by 31 March 1984.

A similar battle is also shaping up over NSF's education programs. Although the budget bill approved last week does not tell NSF how to spend its newfound education wealth, Congress is likely to pass legislation soon which will establish a detailed program. Some of the bills under consideration would divide up the funds according to the number of students in school districts. But the National Science Board, NSF's policy-making body, sees such an approach as undermining the foundation's traditional goal of supporting only the best projects. On 17 June, in an apparent attempt to head such legislation off at the pass, the board passed a resolution stating that NSF "should select projects and activities in precollege education on the basis of the principles of excellence and should not administer formula or other forms of grant programs that might preclude application of these principles."

As for NASA, it came away with a budget of $7.177 billion, an increase of some $71 million over the Administration's request. The chief additions to NASA's R & D budget were $45 million to help pay for cost overruns on the Space Telescope, which has been threatening to eat into other space science projects, and $20 million to provide extra support for research in physics, astronomy, and planetary sciences.

EPA has ended up with a research budget of $142.7 million, an increase of about 20 percent over current funding levels. Even this boost will not lift the agency back to the level it enjoyed before the Reagan Administration took office, however. The House had wanted to give EPA $165 million for R & D, but the Senate was not so eager to bust the budget, and stuck closely to the Administration's request. The compromise approved last week does, however, add funds for a few key research programs, including $7 million for R & D on hazardous wastes and $5 million for high-priority research to be funded at the direction of the administrator.

DOE's budget contains funds for several controversial programs, and it is something of a miracle that Congress managed to agree on a final bill. In what is rapidly becoming an established pattern, Congress has refused to go along with major reductions in funding for solar energy, approving $179 million for DOE's solar research, compared with $87 million proposed by the Administration.

As for high energy physics, Congress has stuck fairly close to the Administration's budget request, although it has shaved some money off the budget for the Stanford Linear Collider and added $5 million for Isabelle at Brookhaven, apparently in an attempt to keep a breath of life in the project.

A major casualty is the National Center for Advanced Materials (NCAM), a new facility to be built at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory. Congress approved only $3 million for the project instead of the $25.9 million requested by the Administration. The reduction was made on the grounds that the project has not been properly reviewed by DOE, but Congress says it may be willing to put up more funds for the facility next year. Two other unreviewed projects, the Vitreous State Laboratory at Catholic University and the National Center for Chemical Research at Columbia, were each given $5 million, although Congress told DOE to look at the proposals before dishing out the funds.

As for the Clinch River Breeder Reactor, the budget bill contains no funds at all. Congress will now only consider funding the plant if a financing plan can be worked out to bring more private money into the venture. In that case, the funding would have to be approved by Congress in a separate bill, where it would be extremely vulnerable.—**COLIN NORMAN**

A People's Medical Society

Robert Rodale, who publishes such magazines as *Prevention* and *Organic Gardening*, has launched a national citizens' group whose purpose is to fight rising medical costs and help citizens gain more control over individual health decisions.