Deal Struck on NIH Grants

A compromise struck between Senator Lowell P. Weicker, Jr. (R–Conn.), and David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will enable the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to fund 6000 new and competing grants a year for 4 years, including fiscal year 1985. Weicker, chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that oversees NIH, has been battling the Administration since January in an effort to undo an OMB directive that would have reduced NIH grant levels in fiscal year 1985 from a congressionally approved number of 6500 to only 5000 (*Science,* 1 February, p. 498).

The compromise made it through the Senate in the early hours of 10 May as part of the Budget Resolution. Approval by the House is still required, but what will happen is uncertain. On the one hand, some representatives who are strong NIH supporters say they will accept nothing less than a restoration to the full 6500; on the other, the House has voted a freeze on other science agencies, including the National Science Foundation and the space agency.

The fight over the NIH grants has been intense, pitting budget cutters against researchers who successfully persuaded Congress last year that the time is ripe for a substantial increase in the nation's commitment to funding biomedical science. Congress appropriated a record-breaking $5.15 billion for NIH, which included more than $200 million to pay for 1500 new grants. But OMB, arguing in part that budget cuts are needed to reduce the federal deficit, balked at the size of the increase and came up with what was thought to be an ingenious plan for subverting the will of Congress. The budget office ordered NIH to "forward fund" more than 600 of the additional 1500 grants it would make in fiscal year 1985. By this maneuver, NIH would have made a legally binding commitment to pay those grants in years 1986 and 1987. In effect, a portion of NIH's fiscal 1985 resources would be spent now for 1986–1987.

The forward-funding provision was meant as a way to get around laws that prohibit the Administration from executing budget rescissions without the express approval of Congress. It was regarded by Capitol Hill aides and NIH officials alike as an unorthodox but legal way to reduce research funds. But Weicker was not so sure and asked for a ruling from the Comptroller General.

To everyone's surprise—including OMB's—he challenged the legality of the OMB directive. Citing a little known 1789 statute (the Bona Fide Need Rule), the Comptroller General said that multiyear or forward-funding by NIH would be unlawful (*Science*, 5 April, p. 35). OMB officials who had been adamant about 5000 grants for 1985 began to reconsider.

During the first week in May, Stockman met privately with Weicker and other members of the Senate; it was then that the 6000 agreement was made. In addition to the grants deal, a compromise was struck on a couple of other elements in the budget, the most important being funding for research centers. OMB had wanted to hold the line at 500, while Congress preferred 533. The Budget Resolution splits the difference.

Assuming that the appropriations process now moves quickly through both houses of Congress, the confusion and consternation that have been the hallmark of biomedical researchers recently should be resolved. The question of what the OMB directive meant in terms of peer review and priority scores for grants has been particularly worrisome because researchers (and NIH administrators themselves) thought that in the first grant cycle, approval was given to some applications that would only have been funded if the total grants pool was 6500. Thus, they worried, the competition in the second and third cycles would be unduly stiff, leaving many first-rate proposals out in the cold. This, according to an NIH official, turns out not to be the case. Fewer grants were awarded in the first round than supposed; in fact, the figure is said to be about 30 percent. So, if the 6000 figure finally goes through and NIH is able to award substantially more grants than it did last year, it ought to be business as usual, or even better.

—BARBARA J. CULLITON

Equally, CERN's enthusiasm for the project is based partly on the realization that it is the best prospect for a major new accelerator to be built in Europe in the 1990's.

"If the Americans build [the SSC], then we in Europe are in trouble," Simon van der Meer told a meeting in Stockholm last December shortly after receiving his Nobel Prize. "If the U.S. community doesn't get the money to build the new machine, we in Europe will be in a good position. That's our current dilemma."

But there is an equal realization that the LHC could not be constructed within the laboratory's current level of funding (several major projects have been delayed to enable LEP to be completed within a constant operating budget) and that it would therefore require substantial outside support.

A solution that would bring in other countries not currently members of CERN offers particular attractions to the British government, perhaps the most vocal supporter of the need for cost-effectiveness in international projects and thus for spreading costs as widely as possible. Indeed it is expected to be one of the main recommendations from the report of the committee currently reviewing Britain's membership in CERN.

Two other countries that might be persuaded to join forces on funding the LHC are Japan and Canada. Both have already indicated, through discussions in the Versailles Working Group, that they would consider participating in either the SSC or the LHC, and there are already said to be signs from many Japanese physicists that they would be prepared to back a package deal which included U.S. support for the LHC and European support for a large-scale R&D program into long-term accelerator techniques in the United States.

There is even talk in some European capitals of including in this package agreement to support the construction in the United States of some other large-scale research facility, such as the next major fusion energy device, although no-one has yet suggested a framework—apart from the Versailles Group—in which negotiations toward such a goal could be adequately handled.

At present, most thinking along these lines is purely speculative, and European and American physicists seem content to move along parallel paths. The point at which these paths will cross, however, is steadily moving closer, and some hard bargaining is likely to lie ahead—on both sides of the Atlantic.

—DAVID DICKSON