

Agencies Brace for Cuts in FY-86 Program Budgets

Federal science agencies are searching for ways to cope with an approximate 2 percent reduction in budget outlays that is mandated by the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985. At press-time, the passage of the amendment, which was attached to the legislation to raise the national debt ceiling, was expected to be passed by both houses of Congress and signed by President Reagan.

White House concerns about the amendment's effect on military programs in future years, however, left open the possibility that the amendment might be scuttled. The Administration had last-minute demands for exempting defense in future years from having to make uniform cuts across its programs. The amendment would require this if Congress failed to meet deficit reduction targets prior to the start of any fiscal year.

The measure was introduced on 3 October by Senators Phil Gramm (R-Texas), Warren Rudman (R-N.H.), and Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.). It mandates that the reductions take effect 1 March and that most federal programs be cut equally. The Department of Defense will sustain one-half of the estimated \$12-billion total reduction that is required in the remainder of 1986. The remaining \$6 billion must be taken from about \$285 billion in nondefense federal programs.

Except for DOD, which in 1986 can choose how a \$6-billion reduction will be made, the lack of internal flexibility will disrupt research programs to varying degrees. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for example, says it will be difficult to cut its \$4.66-billion budget since most of the agency's programs involve long-term contracts. Whether shuttle flights, space station, or research activities would be curtailed is uncertain at this time, NASA says.

To obtain a 2 percent reduction in spending, program activities often must be cut more deeply. This occurs because outlays for a particular project that span several years are small initially and grow later. Department of Energy officials estimate programs would have to be cut by 5 percent to

achieve the required savings. Similarly, NIH officials say cuts might average 4 percent.

A more threatening money battle will commence early next year when the President submits his 1987 budget plan to Congress. Under the budget balancing amendment, the deficit must be cut by another \$36 billion—lowering it to \$144 billion. The deficit would be reduced in subsequent years by increments of \$36 billion until the budget is balanced in 1991. Unless Congress enacts new revenue measures next year or alters the law, dozens of federal programs could be eliminated—including some efforts in science. Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole and House leaders have indicated the Gramm-Rudman amendment may prove unworkable and force the White House to accept tax hikes.—**MARK CRAWFORD**

Congressmen Seek Delay in X-ray Laser Test

A group of 28 congressmen wrote to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger on 6 December to request that a test of the x-ray laser, purportedly scheduled for this month, be postponed. Citing press reports that earlier test results had been thrown into question by defects in analytical equipment, the congressmen asked that these "technical problems be corrected" prior to the next experiment.

The impetus for the letter was a statement by Secretary of Energy John Herrington in the *Livermore Valley Times* on 12 November, in which he acknowledged the existence of a dispute over the reliability of equipment used to measure the brightness of the laser. "You have a light beam. You have either intensity x or y ," Herrington said. "We'll find the answer. But I think we need to keep the program going forward, and the tests should go forward. Differences between scientists are to be expected in pure research."

Herrington's remarks were interpreted as suggesting that the analytical equipment would not be repaired before the next test, and they angered Representatives Edward Markey (D-Mass.) and Bill Green (R-N.Y.), the two principal authors of the letter.

"This test will cost the American taxpayer \$30 million, and the results of the test won't even be usable because we have no way to measure them," Markey said.

But several scientists familiar with the program dispute this claim. One, who asked to remain anonymous, said that "it is a judgment call whether to wait," but that "useful information will be produced." Another, who indicated that curing the analytical defects might take as long as a year, said that "the choice is between getting more elegant information much later or less elegant information sooner. Personally, the schedule is a little more hectic than I would choose. But it is also important to proceed in a timely manner."

Green and Markey also cited a report in the *Los Angeles Times* that advice about the defects from four scientists at Los Alamos and two at Livermore, as well as key members of the Jason scientific advisory group, had been ignored. Although the Los Alamos scientists decline to comment, Paul Robinson, the laboratory's principal associate director for national security programs, denies that they differ with Livermore over the timing of the next test.

Others who are familiar with the program concur, and say that its problems stem largely from the fact that it has been oversold and that it has been given too much money. "There is a difference of opinion about whether to go slowly or rapidly," says one scientist, "which has been decided largely on the basis of funding. When a program is well supported, as this one is, the tendency is always to go as fast as you can, because it's interesting. In my opinion, we could use a little more time to think between [test] shots."

In any event, it may be too late to do anything about the next test. If the blast is indeed scheduled for December, the device may already be down the hole, one expert says. Meanwhile, lab officials are taking steps to constrain leaks. Robinson has demanded that all media calls be referred to the public affairs office and that employees inform him of unauthorized disclosures. A memo being circulated at Livermore offers a reminder to "adhere to the classification guidance" and notes that "no one is required to talk to the media."—**R. JEFFREY SMITH**