

NSF Goes to Congress With Plans for Growth

First reactions to request to double agency budget in 5 years are friendly, but legislators raise doubts on funding prospects

In the season when federal officials troop up Capitol Hill to bid for bigger budgets for their agencies, the National Science Foundation has had more than its share of invitations to testify. What accounts for the enhanced interest is the Administration's casting of NSF in a featured role in restoring the country's economic competitiveness and calling for a doubling of the agency's budget over the next 5 years.

By and large, NSF has received a friendly reception in the initial round of hearings. But along with the expressions of esteem has come sharper questioning than usual inspired by the request for a 16.7% increase for the agency over its current budget to a \$1.89-billion total for next year, rising to well over \$3 billion in 5 years.

The most overtly negative reaction came from Senator William Proxmire (D-WI), chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over NSF's budget. Proxmire opened the panel's hearings on 12 March by saying "I cannot think of anything that would be more difficult to do than to double any federal spending program over the next few years. We are fighting a fierce battle against frightening budget deficits and that battle can only get tougher as the years go by."

The most positive reaction from a chairman came from Representative Doug Walgren (D-PA) chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology subcommittee with jurisdiction over NSF authorizations. Walgren thinks that greater 5-year growth than has been requested is justified. Walgren, however, has also said that a major increase in budget must be accompanied by a serious reordering of agency priorities.

Before the Proxmire panel and at other hearings, legislators' interest has focused on the multidisciplinary research centers, where universities and industry would collaborate, that were mentioned in President Reagan's State of the Union message as an important element in his economic competitiveness initiative. NSF director Erich Bloch has been cautious about projecting the number of such centers NSF and other agencies would establish in coming years, but waxes enthusiastic about their potential for improving competitiveness through "knowl-

edge transfer" to industry.

Proxmire pointedly expressed skepticism about the centers at the hearings, not on conceptual but on funding grounds. "I'm particularly concerned over the possibility that the Foundation may be initiating more new centers and groups than can be supported fully in the absence of sharp budget growth, because I simply don't think that kind of growth is going to occur. Consequently, I will resist attempts to start new initiatives that can't be fully carried out unless the NSF budget is doubled," he said.

At hearings earlier in March, the chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee with responsibility for NSF funding, Representative Edward P. Boland (D-MA), voiced similar doubts about NSF's ability to fund the centers in future years.

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At the Senate hearings, Republican members of the Proxmire subcommittee—senators Jake Garn of Utah, Alfonse M. D'Amato of New York, Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico, and Charles E. Grassley of Iowa—appeared more sympathetic to the plans for growth than Proxmire, although their endorsements were far from unqualified. It was NSF's first outing before the Appropriations panel since Proxmire reassumed the chairmanship as a result of the switch to Democratic control and Proxmire not only was the sternest inquisitor but dominated the questioning.

Proxmire's style with budget requests for science agencies is to go over lists of projects with a gimlet eye. At one point in the hearings he invoked his Golden Fleece Awards, which he periodically bestows to call attention to federal expenditures for purposes that he feels do not meet high standards of usefulness.

On his list was a \$90,000 study aimed at reducing injuries in stairway falls. He noted that NSF's description said that stairways today are "essentially no different from stairs

built 5000 years ago." He also singled out three anthropology grants—for studies of non-marriage in rural Irish family systems, on "Ethnoastronomy of Indonesian Sailors and Swidden Farmers," and on bullfighting in Spain as a cultural manifestation of national character.

The NSF response generally followed Bloch's comment to Proxmire that you cannot judge a grant by its title and that it is necessary to examine the content. Proxmire did not press for explanations on individual grants, accepting the offers of Bloch and his lieutenants to provide details of projects in which Proxmire expressed interest. Proxmire was primed with a series of quips, however, including the comment on the study of the bullfight in Spain that "I am afraid the average taxpayer wouldn't want to devote his hard earned dollars to this kind of bull, even if it increased the sum total of human knowledge."

Proxmire's point with the majority of projects on his lengthy list, however, was to inquire whether work supported by NSF overlapped or duplicated that supported by other federal agencies. He also asked Bloch if increased funding for NSF was causing grant seekers to perceive the foundation as a "soft touch. If they can't get [money] through other agencies, do they come to you?" he asked. Bloch denied that such was the case, noting that only 30% of grant proposals submitted can be funded, indicating how stiff the competition is.

In addition to customary appearances before House and Senate authorization and appropriations committees, Bloch in recent weeks appeared before a Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee special hearing on economic competitiveness and a Senate Armed Services defense industry and technology subcommittee hearing on the nation's technology base. And NSF's dance card is filling up for coming weeks.

To draw sweeping conclusions from the initial round of hearings would be unwise. NSF's budget prospects this year depend heavily on the strategy for dealing with the deficit adopted by Congress, in which the Democrats now control both House and Senate. As chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee with considerable leverage on NSF funding, Proxmire took a hard line in challenging NSF pretensions to major budget growth. Whether or not his views prevail, he did, apparently, sum up the congressional attitude at this point as he concluded the hearings on a light note, remarking that NSF was a "high class operation, with a very high class leadership and you're asking for a very high class budget." ■ JOHN WALSH