Science Budgets Fare Well in House Action

House Appropriations Committee adds money back to NSF, NASA budgets; DOE gets pork-barrel projects

RELATIVE to recent years, congressional support for basic research appears to be strong. The House Appropriations Committee, in work on several funding bills, has approved healthy budget increases for the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy. The Senate also is expected to act favorably. Even so, officials at both federal agencies are frustrated because the gains are not as great as they would like.

Officials at NSF are disappointed because the committee's appropriation falls short of the Administration's goals for expanding support of basic research. Furthermore, the appropriation may be subject to a downward adjustment before final congressional action is taken this fall. Meanwhile, DOE officials are angry because they have been burdened with a number of unplanned "pork barrel" projects that may force them to rob other research programs.

In NSF's case, director Erich Bloch asked for $1.89 billion for fiscal year 1988, a $270 million jump over the current budget. This increase was to be the first of a series of hefty budget hikes aimed at doubling NSF's support for research within 5 years. The House Appropriations Committee came in just $50 million short of his request, which means that the agency must make up the shortfall in future budgets to attain its goal by 1992.

The $220 million budget increase provided by the committee would bring NSF's budget up to a record $1.84 billion, well above the 1987 funding of $1.62 billion. But this is not sufficient to fund as many grants as the Administration had hoped. NSF's budget proposal calls for 14,438 awards in fiscal year 1988. That number now may fall to around 13,400. NSF Controller Sandra Toye notes that the agency may choose to increase the size of grants rather than strive to maximize the number of grant awards.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has emerged from House Appropriations Committee with its $9.48 billion budget proposal intact. A recalculation of spending limits allowed the full Appropriations Committee to add $50 million to the budget proposed for NASA by the subcommittee. The full committee restored $25 million for the space station and $25 million for research (*Science*, 19 June, p. 1517).

Appropriations Committee aides, however, warn that budget problems may lie ahead when Senate and House appropriations bills go to conference later this summer. Actual spending in the House legislation* for 1988 may be $900 million more than the Senate budget resolution allows. Without some concessions in the Senate, a cutback on the order of 5% could be imposed on the 1988 budgets for NSF, NASA, Environmental Protection Agency, and other agencies.

The budget for the Department of Energy Office of Energy Research also is clouded by uncertainty. In separate legislation, the House Appropriations Commitee provided DOE's research office with $2.078 billion, $138 million more than was requested. Most of this increase goes to basic energy sciences and health and environmental activities.

Officials there, however, are discouraged. DOE budget analyst Delmar D. Mayhew calculates that Congress has given the office about $100 million in unrequested projects—and only $77 million to carry out the job. Donald K. Stevens, director of basic energy sciences at DOE, says that if all of these projects are adopted by Congress, then other proposed research could be reduced.

For Stevens, the largest single problem in FY 1988 is the House committee's order to provide $11.4 million for the Florida State University computer center. Known as "earmarking," this congressional order, he says, may wreak havoc with his research program.

The problem goes beyond the construction and operation of new facilities. The House committee, for example, also wants DOE to fund 30 fellowships for nuclear engineering "from appropriate sources." This pork-barrel approach to funding university research facilities through the appropriation process is a growing concern, says Stevens. As with the Florida State computer center, it can go on for years and delay the pursuit of other research.

Earmarking has been condemned by the Association of American Universities (AAU), which represents 54 of the nation's top research universities. That body objects to Congress funding projects in this way because it short-circuits the traditional peer-review process for setting priorities on constructing new research facilities. A majority of the organization's members have agreed to observe a moratorium on lobbying Congress to fund special facilities (*Science*, 22 May, p. 909).

Congress, however, shows no signs of abandoning the practice. Last year, the House and Senate voted down amendments aimed at stripping away pork-barrel funding for university projects (*Science*, 8 August 1986, p. 616). Members such as Representative Manuel Lujan, Jr. (R–NM), ranking Republican on the House Space, Science, and Technology Committee, defend the practice as a way of balancing the distribution of R&D dollars—50% of which goes to as few as the 30 top universities.

House appropriations bills for DOE contain at least $44.6 million in new, unplanned facilities for six universities. The Appropriations Committee, chaired by Representative Tom Bevill (D–AL), has among other things provided $10.6 million for a center for applied optics at the University of Alabama, $8.5 million for an institute of advanced physics at Boston University, and $6.5 million for a center for automated technology at Drexel University.

The special funding practice extends beyond the university sector. The Appropriations Committee, without the benefit of a formal scientific review, has added $15 million to help construct a nuclear medicine center at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and $12.7 million to establish the "Institute for Human Genomic Studies" at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City.

While adding a host of new projects, the Appropriations Committee denied DOE's request for $10 million for funds related to the future construction of the Superconducting Super Collider. Total spending for high-energy physics will rise to $556.6 million, up $57 million from the current year. The House Appropriations Committee has yet to act on funding for research conducted at the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense. ■

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*House Appropriations Committee action on the National Science Foundation and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is covered in House of Representatives Report No. 100–189. Department of Energy programs are covered in Report Nos. 100–162 and 100–171. Copies may be obtained by calling the House Documents Room at (202) 225-3456.