Grants Squeeze Stirs Up Lobbyists

Some scientific societies have become activists, hiring a lobbyist to plead for more money for individual investigators, but they initially upset their own allies

LIKE MANY OTHERS around the country, scientists tend to regard the Washington political scene as a slightly distasteful sideshow: full of sound and fury but having little significance to their lives. Now, it seems, that is changing. After seeing award rates for grants at major federal science agencies plummet, and watching with horror the advent of scientific megaprojects with voracious financial appetites, growing numbers of researchers and their scientific societies are jumping into the political fray. Their main objective: more federal dollars for individual investigators.

But some traditional lobby groups that have been working this turf for years have reservations about the researchers' tactics. They contend that the new lobbyists, with their narrowly focused agendas, could undermine the message that more support is needed for science across the board. After a shaky start, all parties are now taking great pains to ward off an internecine struggle between the large, established organizations with a strong Washington presence and upstart scientific groups new on the scene.

Science lobbyists come in a variety of shapes and sizes. At the top are the broad coalitions—made up of numerous smaller societies and institutions—which try to paint the big picture for Congress. Typical of this genre is Coretech, a coalition of universities and industry that argues not only for more research funding but for support for facilities and other parts of the scientific infrastructure. Although biomedical research has traditionally enjoyed strong support, science as an enterprise is "politically vulnerable," says Coretech's executive director, Kenneth R. Kay. "Somebody has got to stand up and be counted for the less politically attractive pieces," says Kay.

After the broad coalitions come the associations of scientific organizations, like FASEB (Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology) and the American Institute of Physics. Then there are the societies dedicated to a particular area of science. Add in lobbyists for individual institutions and specific diseases, and you have the cacophony, or perhaps euphony, of the Washington science lobby.

Until now, the individual scientific societies have been content to let the larger organizations carry the ball. But now they're making themselves heard, arguing for more funds for their own disciplines. Their problem is that as the new kids in town, they have to be careful about the way they cast their message, according to Nan S. Wells of Princeton University's Washington office. Just saying "we want more" is the wrong approach. "It makes them sound very self-seeking, and I don't think that's true," she says. "It's not that they want more, it is that they've been cut back."

Biomedical researchers have certainly been cut back. The number of new and competing renewal grants from the National Institutes of Health has dropped from a high of nearly 6500 2 years ago to only about 4600 this year, and the Bush budget would raise that number only as far as 5100 for next year. Concerned that the low award rates would discourage promising young scientists, the 7500-member American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and the 7000-member American Society for Cell Biology jointly decided to let Congress know that a disaster was looming. So earlier this year they agreed to pay around $100,000 to hire former Maine Congressman Peter Kyros to plead for small science. The 4200-member Biophysical Society has recently joined in to help defray Kyros' expenses.

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Kyros says his job was to launch "an educational effort on behalf of the investigator-initiated research grant people in order to see if we can raise the levels of funding." The first step was to encourage sympathetic members of Congress to send around a "Dear Colleague" letter encouraging the House budget committee to give NIH a favorable budget allocation. That led to a letter, signed by 25 representatives, urging budget committee chairman Leon Panetta (D–CA) to support 1000 new and competing grants over the Bush Administration's budget figure. This, the letter said, could be done with the addition of just $200 million.

That $200-million figure started a mess of trouble. Each year, the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding analyzes the President's budget request and comes up with its own figure for what the budget ought to be. The ad hoc group, a coalition of health organizations, scientific societies, and other groups like the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of American Medical Colleges, is lobbying for $9.2 billion for NIH, or $1.3 billion more than the President requested. That figure would also allow NIH to award 6000 new and competing renewal grants next year, but in its calculations the coalition reckoned this would cost considerably more than the $200 million Kyros and company were seeking.

"I can understand that those scientific societies represent a constituency that is utterly panicked about the number of new and competing renewals in fiscal year 1990," says AAU's Carol Scheman, a member of the ad hoc group's steering committee. "I understand all the reasons behind it, but their solution is not a solution," she says, because it may confuse the lawmakers.

Scheman worries that the two societies may undercut the coalition's message by implying that there is a cheap answer to the grants problem. Scheman argues that this pitch gives tacit approval to "downward negotiations," a tactic NIH has been using to take money from grants already awarded in order to pay for other projects, including new grants. Scheman says downward negotiations are a "pernicious pseudo-policy." "There are no negotiations involved. They're simply cuts," she says.

Kyros says the societies he represents support the coalition's targets; they've just got a different emphasis. "I wasn't charged to be competitive or engage in internecine strife

with anyone. I was charged to work with any groups I could."

William Lennarz, president of ASBMB and chairman of biochemistry and cell biology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, says he's pleased with Kyros' efforts and irritated with the ad hoc group: "They're implying that we're undercutting them because we're these little kids who are just asking for a little bit of money, where we should be asking for the whole pie like they are," says Lennarz. "Their attitude is if you're not with us, you're against us. And that's just not the case."

Responds Scheman: "I think the strength of the ad hoc group has been the extent to which different organizations have been willing to put aside their individual needs and go along with a coalition."

Physicists are also breaking ranks with their umbrella lobbies. The Low Temperature Action Group, a band of materials physicists led by Robert Hallock of the University of Massachusetts, has joined with the condensed matter physics division of the American Physical Society to take their case directly to Congress. The physicists believe that the Superconducting Super Collider will draw attention—and dollars—away from small scientists. Coretech's Kay says if scientists feel mobilized to action by the current funding pinch, that's all for the good: "We're so far behind what some of these investments ought to be that the Congress has to have as much pressure on it as possible to make up the difference. Individual projects or constituencies coming forward and saying 'we're hurting' is generally supportive of that message."

But Robert Park of the Washington office of the American Physical Society says he's concerned about the condensed matter physicists' tactics. "They're not content to plead their own case, but they're attacking other programs, which is worrisome," he says.

Although it is never easy to predict this early in the year how a particular budget will fare, the budget summit this week between the White House and Congress could completely alter the financial landscape. At the moment, the NIH has a good chance of getting a substantial increase over the budget the President requested. The House budget resolution calls for an additional $750 million above the President's request of $7.9 billion, and there should be another $200 million or so for AIDS research.

Even after the summit, there will be a lot of lobbying to do. If a new budget blueprint emerges, the debate starts again on the details. The budget battle only ends when the President signs the appropriating legislation. Unless, of course, there are recisions. It's an endless struggle. ■ **JOSEPH PALCA**

Genome Backlash Going Full Force

A grass roots effort is under way to stop the genome project, the $3-billion effort to map and sequence the human genome. In a clearly orchestrated campaign, D. Allan Bromley, the President's science adviser, has been bombarded by more than 50 letters from disgruntled biologists, most of them modeled on the same letter. So has William Raub, acting director of the National Institutes of Health. Several congressmen are also on the list. And a second letter from a handful of microbiologists is now out on the Bitnet computer network, exhorting their colleagues to action—complete with a sample letter to send to their congressmen. The two letter campaigns have been under way for the past several months and are related in no small part to the funding squeeze at NIH (see page 803), though the protagonists argue larger principles as well.

"Mediocre science, terrible science policy," begins the spirited letter by Martin Rechsteiner, a biochemist at the University of Utah School of Medicine, who so far has spent $400 of his own money on sending the letter to 500 scientists. Many of them, in turn, have sent the missive on to Bromley and others in a sort of scientific chain letter. Rechsteiner's main gripe is that the genome project will divert funds from the rest of biology. And he argues that the ultimate goal of the project, the complete DNA sequence, just isn't worth the money. Rechsteiner maintains that mapping to find disease genes, a goal he does support, would continue without the genome project.

Rechsteiner got the idea for the letter at the November meeting of the American Society of Cell Biologists, where he stood up and complained about the genome project. "I got quite a round of applause," says Rechsteiner, who is convinced that "there is a large silent majority of scientists who are not really fond of the genome project." He likens NIH's decision to also map and sequence the genomes of organisms such as yeast and worm, which has garnered more support for the project, to "political maneuvers by defense contractors to spread manufacturing among several states."

Rechsteiner, whose letter went out in January, has so far received 70 responses from fellow scientists, along with $25 to help defray the costs of distribution. Most are letters of support. "I'm ahead in Nobel laureates 3 to 1," he says.

Michael Syvanen, the author of the second letter, was spurred into action by many of the same concerns, particularly the diversion of funds from more "diverse, inspired, and problem-oriented research." Syvanen, a bacterial geneticist at the University of California, Davis, persuaded five colleagues to sign on and then mailed the letter to 100 scientists about 6 weeks ago. He put it on Bitnet in April. Syvanen got an immediate response, also on Bitnet, from Elke Jordan, deputy director of the Center for Human Genome Research at NIH, who wanted to correct the "serious inaccuracies" in the letter.

Rechsteiner also received a letter from Jordan and one from James Wyngaarden, associate director for life sciences under Bromley in the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), as well. Wyngaarden concedes that support for the project is not unanimous and says that some of the issues Rechsteiner raises also caused NIH to pause before embracing the project. But he then goes on to counter a number of Rechsteiner's assertions, as does Jordan in her letter.

For one, it is not clear that the money appropriated specifically for the genome project would have gone to NIH otherwise, they say. Nor can the funding squeeze be blamed on the genome project. Jordan instead blames the increase in the average length and cost of research grants, among other things. Both Wyngaarden and Jordan point out that about half of the genome budget will go to the investigator-initiated science the two critics extol. Moreover, in the near term, most of those funds will be spent on mapping and cloning—and not large-scale sequencing.

Rechsteiner and Syvanen deny that they acted because they are having trouble getting their own work funded. Says Syvanen: "The signers all have productive labs and have been funded, but we are not totally secure about it. Were the critics swayed by the responses from Wyngaarden and Jordan? "Not at all. I don't agree with any of it," responds Syvanen. "The answer is no," adds Rechsteiner. In fact, he is considering sending his letter out to 10,000 more people, and will spend up to $3000 to do so. Nor have the letters had a noticeable effect on federal thinking. At OSTP Wyngaarden says, "We take the letter seriously but disagree. We see no reason not to go forward as planned." ■ **LESLIE ROBERTS**