SCIENCESCOPE

edited by DAVID P. HAMILTON

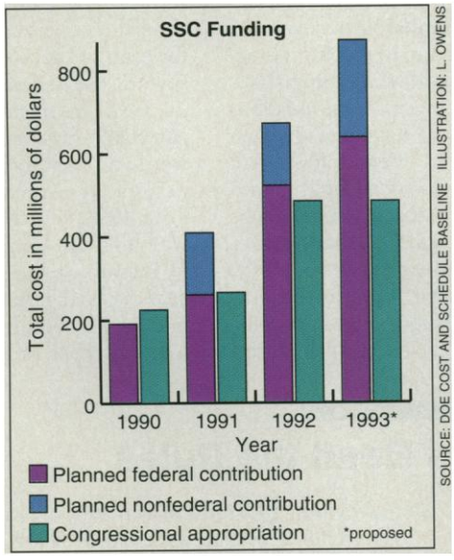
DOE Research Funding Freeze?

The 1993 appropriations season has opened with a bang. As *Science* went to press, the House Appropriations Committee appeared ready to freeze a variety of Department of Energy (DOE) research programs—including the $8.25 billion Superconducting Super Collider (SSC)—at their 1992 budget levels. Such a move would amount to a budget cut once the numbers are adjusted for inflation.

The committee's decision would give the SSC $484 million—far short of the $650 million the Bush Administration had requested. SSC officials say such a funding freeze could add $300 million to the project's total cost and stretch out the completion date some 18 months. But it could be even worse: SSC critics Representatives Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY) and Howard Wolpe (D–MI) are planning to offer an amendment on the House floor in the next week or so to kill the project outright. Their forces predict the vote will be close.

The project's backers, however, are hoping that the Senate will undo some of the damage the House inflicts. The Senate Appropriations Committee, due to take up the bill later this summer, is traditionally more generous than its counterpart in the House.

Meanwhile, other energy research programs are also likely to feel the pain if the House committee's numbers hold up. Fermilab's main injector upgrade to its Tevatron accelerator, for instance, would get $15 million, only half the amount requested. Similarly, the magnetic fusion program, which had been promised 5% annual growth over the next 5 years, would receive $337 million, $22 million less than the Administration's request.



Columbus Telescope Project Back on Track

The troubled Columbus project—billed as the largest optical telescope in the northern hemisphere—is back on track, now that a U.S. foundation, Research Corp., has agreed to put up $7.5 million to underwrite construction at Mount Graham in Arizona.

The deal, signed in Italy last Monday, ends a 9-month hiatus that followed Ohio State University's decision to pull out of the project. Since then, project leaders at the University of Arizona and the Arcetri Astrophysical Observatory in Florence have been searching desperately for a partner willing to come up with the $15 million Ohio State had promised.

Although the project is still $7.5 million short, construction can now begin while the search for funds continues. Arcetri director Franco Pacini says that his group will begin awarding contracts to build the telescope's mounting within the next few months. Until it has replaced the full $15 million, the group will be building a "bare bones" version of the original telescope consisting of only one of the twin 8.4-meter mirrors called for in the original design.

Ohio State's withdrawal left a bitter taste among project scientists: Pacini, for instance, learned of the decision only when he was contacted by U.S. journalists. So it's no surprise that the Arizona team this week made the most of a prime opportunity to embarrass Ohio State president Gordon Gee by announcing the Research Corp. deal at a 9 June press conference on the university's doorstep in Columbus, Ohio, during the annual meeting of the American Astronomical Society.

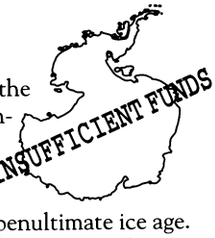
NIH Presence Shrinks at AIDS Meeting

The organizers of this year's international AIDS conference in Amsterdam—now less than 6 weeks away—are expecting a record attendance. But NIH researchers will be difficult to spot among the crowds.

Call it the revenge of Congress. Reportedly "outraged" by the number of NIH scientists who flew to Italy for the 1991 AIDS conference, legislators slashed the Public Health Service's travel budget by 29% earlier this year. As a result, NIH has been able to approve only 48 travel requests for scientists, down from 85 the year before. Only scientists directly involved in the conference program or making presentations will make the trip to Amsterdam.

Even without a full NIH contingent, the American presence should still be the largest at the meeting: More than 3000 U.S. researchers are expected to attend. Organizers report 8400 total registrations, fast approaching the last meeting's total of just under 9000.

Russians Go On a Data Strike in Antarctica



The hard times afflicting scientists in the ex-Soviet Union have caught up with researchers in Russia's furthermost research outposts in Antarctica, who say they're mad as hell and aren't going to take it anymore. Already facing winter-long darkness and isolation, the staffs of all five Russian Antarctic stations have gone on strike over a 90% pay cut, and they now say they won't send their data back to Moscow and St. Petersburg until their pay is restored.

In a radio message to American colleagues at the South Pole, Vladimir Nazarov, the leader of Vostok Station, and his staff pleaded for help from the outside world. "We are in a hopeless situation," the message stated, "and we have decided to struggle for economic and social rights.... The miserable salary of Russian polar researchers, working in the rigorous climate of Antarctica, is hardly enough for our families even to buy food. We cannot help them."

It wasn't so long ago that Antarctic station staff pulled down big salaries in exchange for spending what must be the longest year in science collecting environmental data and doing research, such as conducting the world's premier ice coring operation at Vostok. Researchers there have uncovered frozen records of conditions as far back as the penultimate ice age.

It's not clear just how much pain the data strike will inflict on the Russian government, although officials there have certainly gotten the message: The National Science Foundation promptly passed it along to the head of the Russian agency overseeing Antarctic research. Meanwhile, American and French researchers who are cooperating with the Russians on the analysis of the ice core are worried not only about their colleagues but also about the possibility that in the future, Russia's best drillers and scientists may have even less desire to spend a long year on the ice.