

for disaster," saw the amendment as "a very significant moment" for NIH and the Department of Health and Human Services. He was "impressed" by the strong show of support not just from longtime friends of NIH but also from senior Republicans such as Alphonse D'Amato (R-NY), Connie Mack (R-FL), and Arlen Specter (R-PA). Even so, Varmus warned researchers that "we still need to keep our guard up. The scientific community needs to be aware that we're

quite early in the [budget] process. ... It's not going to be fat city for biomedical research."

As an example of how tough times have become, Varmus said that NIH may have to consider reducing the 3% to 4% annual increase that is standard on continuing NIH grants. "Our ability to fund new grants is going to be determined most dramatically not by the intramural program but by the extent to which we ... [adjust] payments to holders of multiyear grants," Varmus said.

Last week, in a lecture to the Massachusetts Medical Society, Varmus reinforced that message by urging biomedical scientists to recognize how much has changed in the last few years. "The research enterprise is making a painful transition from an era of growth to an era of steady-state activity," he said. Despite Hatfield's victory, Congress's drive to cut the budget suggests that even this sober assessment may be optimistic.

—Eliot Marshall

GEOSCIENCE

Republicans Take Ax to NOAA Research

A group of Republican lawmakers surprised the Clinton Administration last week with a proposal to dismember the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) as part of eliminating the Commerce Department. The plan was much more radical than NOAA officials were expecting, and they warned that it would disrupt weather forecasting and curtail research on topics ranging from volcano plumes to the ocean depths.

Advocates of the plan, led by freshman Representative Dick Chrysler (R-MI), believe that NOAA does applied research that should not be funded by the federal government. They want to halt NOAA's coastal and water pollution studies, dispose of the agency's fleet of research vessels, and terminate the office responsible for a range of oceanic and atmospheric research. The National Weather Service and NOAA's constellation of weather satellites would be transferred to the Interior Department; portions of that service would be turned over to the private sector. The plan would also sell off NOAA's 11 environmental research labs.

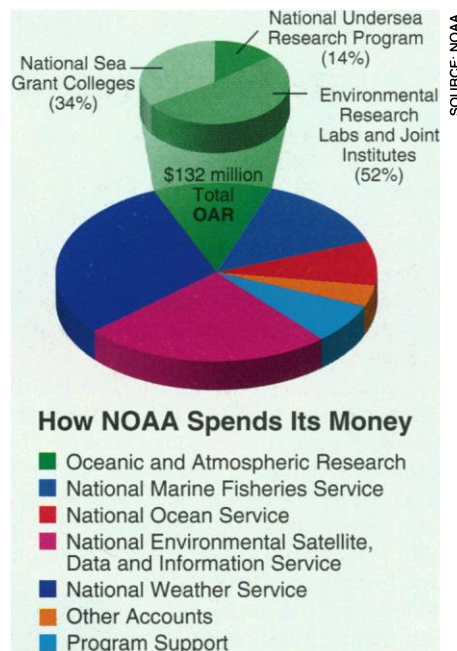
The radical reshuffling, incorporated into a bill slated to be introduced next week in the House, has won the endorsement of some influential Republicans. "The Commerce Department is history—put a fork in it," said Budget Committee Chair John Kasich (R-OH), who attended a press conference to unveil the plan. And Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS) also added his blessing, calling Commerce "the basement of the federal bureaucracy."

NOAA officials were caught off guard by the details in the bill. They had thought the GOP plan would simply shift most of the functions of the agency—whose \$2 billion budget represents 40% of the Commerce Department—to the Interior Department rather than dismantle them. "This jeopardizes our ability to perform our basic functions," Doug Hall, Commerce assistant secretary for oceans and atmosphere, told *Science*. "It would decimate atmospheric research in this country as well as our satellite network."

Scientists who benefit from NOAA largess agree. "This will hurt a lot of individuals

and a lot of schools," says Christopher Harrison, a University of Miami geophysicist and general secretary of the American Geophysical Union. He also disputes Republican claims that NOAA's research duplicates efforts by other federal agencies.

Chrysler's bill is one of a series that fleshes out proposals to abolish particular agencies. Before it becomes law, however, it must pass the authorization and appropriations panels that set policy and distribute money. "Many of NOAA's functions are strongly supported



Disappearing act. GOP proposal would wipe out NOAA's oceanic and atmospheric research.

by the chairman, and any move to dismantle these would likely face strong opposition," said Steve Hanson, a spokesperson for the House Resources Committee chaired by Representative Don Young (R-AK), which oversees ocean and fisheries policy.

Indeed, NOAA officials are banking on a rift between Republicans to save their turf. "About 70% of the fishing industry is in Alaska," says Hall. "And some of the most severe weather is there too." He counts the

two Alaskan senators and Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR), chair of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, among NOAA's allies. They are also anticipating support from those who know NOAA best. The Republican co-sponsors "by and large are not really familiar" with the research NOAA conducts, says Ned Ostenso, NOAA assistant administrator for oceanic and atmospheric research. A Republican staffer sympathetic to NOAA agrees. "We'll get our shot at this," he says. "Why get into a frenzy over this now?"

For Ostenso, however, this is more than an academic exercise: His office would be eliminated under the Republican plan. Its annual budget of \$132 million operates 11 environmental research laboratories, funds eight joint institutes and 29 Sea Grant College Program institutions, and supports an undersea research program at five universities. Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, for example, gets \$1 million a year for a Sea Grant program that carries out both fundamental research and community outreach. "It would be hard to find other funding sources, particularly for outreach," says Judy McDowell, project director.

NOAA officials are skeptical that the private sector would be interested in taking over the environmental labs. "I haven't had any calls from anyone today wanting to buy them," says Hall. The bill would also require the agency to:

- Halt the modernization of NOAA's fleet and dispose of all its assets;
- Transfer nautical and charting functions to the Defense Mapping Agency or privatize those functions; and
- Terminate specialized agricultural, marine radiofax, and forestry weather services, as well as the regional climate centers run by the National Weather Service.

Hall is particularly worried about the fate of the NOAA satellites that monitor the Earth continuously. Coincidentally, the latest geostationary weather spacecraft was successfully launched the same day the Republicans unveiled their plan. The cuts, Hall said, would force NOAA to abandon some of those expensive satellites to save money.

—Andrew Lawler