

CONGRESS

Republicans Split Over Fate of The Department of Energy

House Republicans last week unveiled two divergent plans for the beleaguered Department of Energy (DOE), both of which would drastically shrink the department's \$18-billion-a-year budget. The mildest one would reduce fusion research by a third, cut renewable energy programs by half, and halt science education funding for universities—but leave the department intact. The other, more radical, plan would dismantle DOE during the next 3 years and likely lead to the closing, consolidation, or sale of many of DOE's 30 national laboratories. The three nuclear-weapons labs would be transferred to the Defense Department. Democrats immediately attacked both proposals, but the real battle now is within the Republican ranks.

The milder prescription came from the House Science Committee panel that authorizes research-related energy and environment spending. It may be mild compared with the alternative, but it's still strong medicine: The panel voted on 8 June to cut DOE's \$5.3 billion R&D budget by 30% for next year. Its bill would slash energy research spending by almost \$400 million from its current level of \$1.7 billion, carving \$137 million from the \$368 million fusion budget alone. It would also impose a 16% cut in biological and environmental research, eliminate the \$57 million technology transfer program for energy research at the laboratories, and zero out university and science education programs totaling \$70 million.

These cuts are surprisingly deep, coming from a panel that has traditionally been a strong supporter of DOE. The panel's bill, which now goes to the full committee and then to the House floor, authorizes spending levels that are supposed to guide the work of the appropriations committees, which write the actual budgets. Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), who chairs the subcommittee, said the legislation "reflects our attempt to get corporate America off the dole." The actual cuts to research, he added, "are inconsequential," noting that the basic energy sciences program and high-energy nuclear physics win small increases under the plan.

That's not how Deputy Energy Secretary Bill White sees it. He said later the same day that Rohrabacher's plan is "a direct assault on science" that would cripple the department's research efforts. Cuts to global warming programs, adds DOE energy research chief Martha Krebs, "are based on a kind of ignorance that is virtually out-

rageous," while the effect on the fusion program would be devastating. DOE estimates the bill would lead to massive cuts to the department's network of laboratories, including a 34% cut for Sandia National Laboratory and a 26% reduction for Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Rohrabacher acknowledged to *Science* on 7 June that the cuts to the fusion program would halt plans for the \$742 million Tokamak Physics Experiment at Princeton University, a central piece of the long-term U.S. fusion research plan, which DOE managers hoped to start on this year. "The fusion community must reprove its claim to federal dollars," he said. Money requested to plan for U.S. participation in the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, Europe's high-energy physics laboratory, would also be eliminated; Rohrabacher said he first wants to see the details of any cooperative effort before authorizing funds.

House Democrats lambasted the bill as inconsistent and dangerous. But they failed to muster enough votes to pass an amendment in Rohrabacher's subcommittee to reverse many of the cuts in energy research. Representative Zach Wamp (R-TN), who represents the Oak Ridge area, was the sole Republican defector.

The bill's approval at the subcommittee level was a victory for Rohrabacher and Science Committee Chair Bob Walker (R-PA). They hope an austere authorization bill will provide a blueprint for House appropriators, who will be cutting DOE's budget anyway. Refusing to make cuts, Walker said, would "sink this committee into the wells of irrelevancy." Added Rohrabacher: "If we can't make an honest budget today, there will be a lot of people taking the extreme position of eliminating DOE."

Some already are. A dozen freshmen Republicans, with backing from party leaders like House Budget Committee Chair John Kasich (R-OH), came up with the second prescription for DOE last week: They called for the department to be downgraded to an agency and then eliminated. An independent panel patterned on the military base closure commission would take 3 years to make recommendations on the closure, con-

solidation, and privatization of the DOE laboratories, along with the type of energy research the government should conduct. "There are too many [labs], and too much pork and too much parochialism," said Kasich.

The proposed commission would not address the three weapons labs—Sandia, Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. Those labs, along with environmental restoration work associated with the nuclear weapons program, would be transferred to a new civilian agency under control of the Defense Department.

Representative Todd Tiahrt (R-KS), the freshman lawmaker who is leading the charge against DOE, plans to meet with Motorola Chairman Robert Galvin this week to discuss Galvin's vision for privatiz-

ing the labs laid out in a report released in February (*Science*, 10 February, p. 787) but rejected by DOE officials. Tiahrt said the freshmen's plan, by terminating coal, fossil fuel, and conservation research programs, selling off power marketing administrations, and reducing overhead, would save \$20 billion over 5 years. DOE's White dismissed the proposal, contained in a six-page document, as a "press release thing" that fails to explain those savings.

The legislation has yet to be introduced, and it must be considered by three House committees. A battle is shaping up that pits freshmen and GOP leaders against authorizers and appropriators, who are likely to resist scrapping the department entirely. "We're going to have to fight some of our own people to get this done," said Kasich. If passed, the bill faces even tougher going in the Senate, particularly from DOE ally and Budget

Committee Chair Pete Domenici (R-NM).

For now, the authorizers remain vague about their position. Rohrabacher said he is "supportive of the concept of eliminating the department" once major cuts are made. His aides, however, say he will not back the legislation. Walker also supports the idea, but he has concerns about the Tiahrt plan—particularly the weapons labs transfer. "He wants this done the right way," says his press secretary, Melissa Sabatine.

Kasich warns that anyone sitting on the fence will get a not-so-subtle reminder of their campaign promises to reduce the federal bureaucracy. "If they start slipping, we'll get some of the freshmen to work them over so they remember what it is they came here to do," he said.

—Andrew Lawler



Divergent views. Representatives Rohrabacher (top) and Tiahrt.