House Puts Its Stamp on the Budget

It has passed all the appropriations bills that fund civilian science; applied rather than basic research is hardest hit, but few areas are unscathed. The battle now goes to the Senate

In a normal year, a 5.7% increase in the budget for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) would seem ho-hum. This year, when Congress is cutting deeply into domestic spending to slash the deficit and deliver a promised tax cut, it would be extraordinary. Yet, a few hours before adjourning for a month-long "district work break" (formerly known as the August recess) last week, the House approved an $11.94 billion budget for NIH in the 1996 fiscal year—$655 million more than this year, and $166 million more than the Clinton Administration requested.

NIH's good fortune stands in marked contrast to the way most other areas of science and technology have fared in Congress so far this year. In general, the House—which approved most appropriations bills before it adjourned (see table)—has followed its new Republican leadership's agenda for research (see page 749): It voted to eliminate hundreds of millions of dollars in spending on industrial research programs; cut deeply into environmental research, including global change programs spread over several agencies; squeezed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) while continuing to fund the space station; and held key basic research agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) to about the level they received this year. In this environment, the 5.7% increase for NIH may seem too good to be true. And in fact, it may be.

When Congress returns on 6 September, the budget action will swing to the Senate side of Capitol Hill, where different priorities in areas such as jobs and housing programs are likely to shape key areas of spending. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Mark Hatfield (R–OR) warned in a recent interview with *Science* that the NIH increase will be difficult to sustain (*Science*, 28 July, p. 471). And even when the House and Senate eventually agree on a final version of each appropriations bill, bitter battles over several measures—including the bill containing NIH funding—are likely to erupt between the Republican-led Congress and the White House. "The train wreck will happen," predicts one White House aide, noting that President Clinton has threatened to veto some of the bills passed by the House unless they undergo substantial revision in domestic spending priorities before reaching his desk.

The bottom line is that few details of what the House has approved should be treated as gospel. But the bills now awaiting attention in the Senate indicate where the battles will take place.

Biomedical research. The biggest battles are likely to be fought over the bill containing funds for NIH. The 5.7% increase for NIH came about thanks in large part to the efforts of appropriations subcommittee chair John Porter (R–IL) (*Science*, 21 July p. 292). But it had to withstand attempts to reorder the overall priorities of the bill, which cuts many health, education, and jobs programs. In the end, the bill encountered a rough passage in the House, but it passed by a slim margin on 3 August.

It may not fare as well in the Senate. Leaders of the Senate Appropriations Committee say the bill lacks "balance," and they intend to rewrite it. Hatfield says he wants to restore job training and education programs, and Senator Arlen Specter (R–PA) intends to restore cuts in low-income heating assistance. These changes are likely to come at the cost of NIH's budget, predicts a key aide, who says the Senate bill, to be drafted in mid-September, will "look very different from the House bill."

The bill's fate could also be affected by the hot-button political issues it touches. For example, the House bill would bar NIH research on human embryos, impose new restrictions on "political advocacy" by nonprofit groups, and earmark $7.5 million for the NIH office of alternative medicine (an increase of $1.9 million). Both Hatfield and Porter say they hope to strip out many of these amendments before final passage. And they are one reason why Clinton has put this bill at the top of his veto list.

NSF and basic research. The House voted to bring several years of increases in NSF's budget to a halt. The agency would get slightly less than it received this year, while research funding would be held flat. It could have been much worse for some NSF grantees. Science Committee chair Robert Walker (R–PA) initially said he wanted to eliminate NSF's social and behavioral science division, but in the end, the appropriations bill left NSF leeway to decide where to trim.

Other key areas of basic research received similar treatment, with the Department of

BUDGET SCORECARD (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

Agency/Program	1995* est.	1996 request	House	Senate	Status**
NSF	**3229**	**3360**	**3160**		Passed House, awaiting Senate Appropriations Committee action
Research	2245	2454	2254		
Education	606	599	599		
Facilities	118	100	100		
NIH	**11,284**	**11,773**	**11,939**		Same as NSF
NASA R&D	**9729**	**9517**	**9012**		Same as NSF
Space station	2100	2100	2100		
Space and life science	2456	2463	2479		
Mission to Planet Earth	1285	1341	1003		
DOE R&D	**6216**	**7013**	**5772**	**6468**	Passed House and Senate; will go to conference committee in Sept.
Basic Energy Science	710	801	763	782	
High energy & nucl. phys.	974	1007	982	962	
Fusion	349	356	222	218	
Commerce R&D	**1117**	**1404**	**741**		Same as NSF
Advanced Technology Prog.	323	467	0		
NOAA R&D	509	580	437		
Office of Tech. Assmnt.	**22**	**22**	**15†**	**0**	Conference report provides no funds
Interior R&D	**672**	**679**	**525**		Same as NSF
USGS	368	373	364		
National Biological Service	152	173	113††		
EPA R&D	**600**	**682**	**496**		Same as NSF

*Totals reflect cuts made by rescission bill approved last month. **As of 4 August.
†To come from Library of Congress budget.
††House voted to eliminate NBS; budget will be transferred to USGS.
SOURCE: BUDGET BILLS AND AAAS. UPDATED AAAS BUDGET ANALYSES CAN BE ACCESSED THROUGH THE WORLD WIDE WEB AT http://www.aaas.org/ UNDER THE SCIENCE & POLICY DIRECTORATE.

Energy's (DOE's) basic energy sciences office and high energy and nuclear physics research programs receiving modest increases over 1995 levels—although less than the Clinton Administration had requested.

Industrial research. If NSF grantees believe they have fared badly, they should take a look at the damage suffered by their colleagues funded by federal programs to develop critical industrial technologies. The House eliminated entirely the $323-million Advanced Technology Program in the Department of Commerce—a program funded jointly by industry—and the Senate is expected to give it the same treatment. Walker and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) have chosen these programs as prime targets, prompting former Science Committee chair George Brown, Jr., to declare last week: "Walker's philosophy is that technology is not a part of science"

Space program. The House voted to slash NASA's budget by $640 million while providing enough funds—$2.1 billion—to keep the space station alive. In this harsh environment, NASA's astronomy and space science programs fared relatively well, with a $20-million increase over this year's level. Indeed, only one major science program proposed by the Clinton Administration, the Space Infrared Telescope Facility, didn't make it in the final bill. Less fortunate was NASA's Mission to Planet Earth, a major global change monitoring program. It would be cut by about $300 million. Congressional aides say the Senate is unlikely to go along with this cut, however, which could increase the pressure on the space science budget.

Environmental R&D. NASA's global change program isn't the only casualty in this area. The House zeroed out most of the global change research funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (*Science*, 28 July, p. 472). It also voted to dismantle the Interior Department's newly created National Biological Service and transfer its diminished budget to a new division at the U.S. Geological Survey.

When Congress returns on 6 September, all these issues will take center stage. The appropriations bills are supposed to be signed into law before the 1996 fiscal year starts on 1 October. But few observers expect that to happen. Indeed, the White House has already directed federal agencies to draw up contingency plans if President Clinton and Congress do not resolve their differences by the deadline; in the worst case, agencies may have to start furloughing workers and halt the flow of money to researchers and contractors on 1 October. The long, hot summer is likely to continue well into the fall.

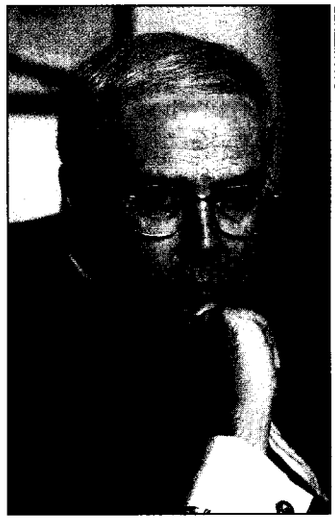
–Colin Norman

Reported by Andrew Lawler, Eliot Marshall, and Richard Stone

SCIENCE INTERVIEW

Robert Walker: The Speaker's Right Hand on Science

When he is back home in Pennsylvania's Amish country, Representative Bob Walker (R) likes to joke that high technology in his district means new grease for the wagon wheels. In Washington, however, he is busy greasing the wheels of science and technology policy as chairman of the Science Committee. Walker has emerged this year as a pivotal player in the funding battles raging in Congress over energy research, space projects, and the proper role of government in science.



SAM KITTNER

It's an exhilarating feeling for a man who served almost two decades in a House of Representatives dominated by the other party, and the last 4 years as the ranking minority member on the panel he now controls. "Committee chairmen have tremendous amounts of power," says the lanky Walker with a trace of awe. "I've learned in recent weeks why Democrats hung around for 30 years to become committee chairmen—you have a chance to dominate the policy agenda." On the other hand, he says, "as ranking member, you are lucky if you can get three science nerds to show up when you speak."

"I've learned ... why Democrats hung around for 30 years to become committee chairmen."
—Robert Walker

Besides presiding over the 50-member science committee, which authorizes funding for most science other than biomedical research, Walker is the number two Republican on the Budget Committee—the powerful panel that earlier this year developed the budget resolution to cut taxes and eliminate the deficit over the next 5 years—and he chairs the House Republican Leadership. He also describes himself as "the closest political ally and congressional friend" of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA), a connection that gives him extra clout. He enlisted Gingrich's support last month, for example, in persuading the House Appropriations Committee to adopt a budget for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that he favors (*Science*, 28 July, p. 471).

Walker now is engaged in a fierce struggle to redirect science spending by canceling hundreds of millions of dollars worth of industrial research programs in the Commerce and Defense departments. He says that basic research, not industrial R&D, "is *the* mission of government when we talk about science." He has also changed the way the Science Committee operates. The committee has traditionally authorized relatively generous spending levels for the agencies under its jurisdiction while the appropriations subcommittees—which craft the actual budgets within limits laid down by the budget resolution—have wielded the knife and carved out their own spending priorities. This year, however, Walker held his committee to the same tight spending limits as the appropriations subcommittees, and he and Gingrich have been cajoling appropriators to follow the science committee's lead. As a result, the appropriations bills generally mirror those coming out of Walker's committee. One casualty, however, is traditional bipartisan harmony on the Science Committee: Every bill has been attacked by the panel's Democrats, who have accused the Republicans of damaging the science base.

Walker says he has been enthusiastic about science "since I was a kid, though I was a terrible student when it came to learning theorems and that sort of thing." Trained in education and political science, he was a school teacher and congressional staffer before his election to the House in 1976.

Walker was interviewed by *Science* editors in his committee office shortly before Congress adjourned for its August recess. The following is a transcript of his remarks, edited by *Science* for brevity.

–Andrew Lawler

Q: *Does it depress you that there is so little interest in science in Congress?*