



Money isn't the only thing on Congress's mind as it returns to Washington this week, although the upcoming battle on appropriations is likely to be a memorable one. Also hanging fire on Capitol Hill are policy issues affecting R&D, including whether to pare down or dismantle departments. Here are some items to watch for.

Congress Ready to Reshape Departments

Amid the fury of this summer's 1996 congressional budget battle, some of the more dramatic Republican proposals to dismantle parts of the federal bureaucracy were put on a back burner. Now the House Science Committee is about to turn up the heat: This week it began an intensive look at whether the Energy and Commerce departments should be reorganized or abolished.

First on the agenda is the Department of Energy's (DOE's) role in managing the national laboratories. Lawmakers are deeply divided over what to do. Four separate pieces of legislation already introduced on the subject run the gamut from terminating some or all labs to cutting staff at non-defense facilities or restricting lab missions. DOE officials, university managers, contractors, and lab directors were scheduled to testify before a House panel on 7 September. Further hearings are likely on the topic before any action is taken, staffers say.

Then the committee will turn to a proposal by Representative Dick Chrysler (R-MI) to abolish the Commerce Department, home of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Chrysler wants to dismember NOAA and NIST and give the pieces to other agencies. The bill has support from congressional leaders and freshmen, but there are many Republican skeptics—including Science Committee Chair Bob Walker (R-PA). The bill's backers also have to contend with the Commerce Committee, which

shares jurisdiction over the department with Walker's panel. White House officials, meanwhile, have warned that the president would veto any legislation that does away with Commerce, largely to retain its role in promoting U.S. business abroad.

Clinton to Stand Up For Science

As Congress and President Clinton head for a showdown on the budget, the White House is planning a series of staged events this fall to reaffirm the president's position on research and development. White House officials say the president will use his bully pulpit to argue against many of the congressional cuts in science programs. "He is personally worried about R&D, and his interest in this is quite broad," says one official.

The plan fits into an overall strategy for coping with a dis-

gruntled American public if disagreements between Congress and the president shut down the government in October. The details, however, have not yet been hammered out.

NBS Could Stay Intact

The fate of the federal government's newest science agency, the National Biological Service (NBS), will be decided this month. The House wants to kill it off. It voted last month to dismantle the NBS, part of the Interior Department, and move its functions to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), allotting \$112 million to continue its research. The Senate, however, was more lenient. It passed a bill that would give the agency \$146 million, much closer to its \$167 million 1995 budget, and keep it alive—renamed the Natural Resources Science Agency—as a sister bureau to the USGS.

NBS spokesperson Trudy Harlow says the NBS would much prefer to be its own bureau than a division of one run by scientists "who study volcanoes and rocks as opposed to living things." A compromise between the House and Senate proposals, both embodied in Interior appropriations bills, will be worked out later this month.

A Science Superbill?

Republican members of the House Science Committee are planning an unusual approach to getting authorization bills for a half-dozen key science agencies to the House floor. Chair Robert Walker (R-PA) intends to bundle together bills for the Department of Energy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration into a single package. The committee has already approved all the bills individually, but they have been held up in the logjam of legislation awaiting the House's attention. The resulting superbill would look a bit like an authorization bill for a Department of Science and Technology—something Walker has long advocated.

Last week, House staffers said they were confident the Rules Committee would allow them to use this method to speed passage of the legislation. If it works, the superbill could reach the House floor by the end of the month. The budgets for the science agencies are already laid out in the appropriations bills that have passed the House, but authorizers hope approval of the superbill will underscore their role in setting overall policy. The Senate, however, is unlikely to follow the fast-track approach, casting doubt on whether the bills will be signed into law.

Waiting for the Train Wreck

If you expect to convince your member of Congress not to cut your program's budget for 1996, as a senior Senate staffer says, "Hurry up." As lawmakers get back to work this week, their first task will be to complete funding bills for next year. They hope to have all 13 appropriations bills on President Bill Clinton's desk before 1 October, when the 1996 fiscal year starts.

Then the real budget battle could begin: Clinton has already said he will veto some of those measures if they gut domestic spending programs, and that could force the government to suspend all but essential operations until a compromise is worked out. If that happens, not only government workers could suffer—so could anyone with a federal contract not deemed essential. For example, at the University of Maryland, College Park—which receives \$150 million annually in federal research funds—a shutdown could cost \$300,000 a day, according to President William Kirwan. "It would force an immediate fiscal crisis," Kirwan said on 29 August at a meeting organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) (*Science's* publisher) on the status of 1996 R&D funding.

This year's fight is just the start of what will be a long and difficult road for federal science in coming years, policy experts agree. William Hoagland, staff director of the Senate Budget Committee, said Congress is "hardly" singling out R&D. But he added that science should not expect any special treatment in the congressional push to reduce the deficit: "This is one area where there is bipartisanship." AAAS policy chief Albert Teich concurred. "The president's numbers, like Congress's, seem to be heading south," he said.

The grim talk left some feeling nostalgic. "We've seen the best of times in federal research," Kirwan told the group wistfully.