

Democrats Urge Clinton to Stand Up for R&D Programs

Republicans in Congress have held the scientific high ground during most of this year's budget battles by arguing in favor of basic research and against technology programs. But Democrats are starting to fight back. Several members of the House and Senate, backed by a small group of White House officials, are trying to persuade President Bill Clinton to take a bolder stance to protect the Administration's favored science and technology programs and threaten to veto appropriations bills if necessary. Most spending bills are currently at a delicate stage in Congress, as legislators are trying to come up with final versions to send to the president (see table).

So far, Clinton intends to make a speech in mid-October on the importance of science and technology, but he has given little indication that he would go to the mat to back his R&D budget proposals. Eight Democratic senators have been trying since March to meet with him to make their case for a tougher line. In a 30 June letter to the president, they again asked for a meeting to work out a strategy to save R&D programs, especially those supporting technology development, from the Republican budget ax. That strategy should embrace basic science as well, according to Jim Kennedy, spokesperson for Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), who is leading the charge. "We're concerned about cuts across the board to science programs ... and we want to carry the message to



the scientific community and the public at large," he says. Other aides predicted the meeting with the president could take place within 2 weeks.

The coalition grew out of a Democratic task force on economic leadership, created in 1992 but now disbanded, that emphasized the need for increased federal R&D spending. "It's good policy to promote growth and high-wage jobs," says another Senate staffer involved in the effort. "And we're worried that the whole message of competition and growth is getting lost."

Representative George Brown (D-CA), ranking minority member of the House Science Committee, sounded a similar note in a recent letter to Clinton urging him to consider vetoing spending bills that contain big cuts in science and technology. The Republican proposals, Brown argued, "will devastate federal support for many of the nation's major research universities" and destroy joint government-industry high-tech programs. The result, said Brown, would be major job losses. Vice President Al Gore responded with a phone call assuring Brown of his support for R&D.

Within the White House, Science Adviser Jack Gibbons has orchestrated several recent press briefings with senior Administration officials to drum up support for civilian and defense R&D. Top economic adviser Laura Tyson called the cuts "a misguided approach to a balanced budget" in a briefing

2 weeks ago, while Bowman Cutter, deputy assistant to the president for economic policy, told reporters in a separate meeting that "Congress is cutting the source of our economic growth."

To date, most of the Administration's firepower has been aimed at countering GOP attempts to eliminate industry-led programs such as the \$430 million Advanced Technology Program and the \$208 million Technology Reinvestment Program (TRP). Republicans say that the efforts are little more than taxpayer giveaways to wealthy corporations. But Democrats disagree. "The private sector will not pick it up—they are likely to spend less on R&D," says Tyson. Adds Cutter: "When the federal government reduces R&D investment, approximately 12 months later the private sector does too."

That emphasis, says one White House official, is part of a decision "to focus on where the numbers are worse." For TRP, the strategy may have been successful, thanks to sympathetic Senate Republicans. A House and Senate defense appropriations conference last week agreed to spend \$195 million in fiscal year 1996 on the program, which the House had wanted to eliminate. That amount is only \$13 million less than TRP received this year, although it's well short of the \$500 million the Administration had requested.

But the strategy has also forced other research programs under the congressional gun to fend for themselves. Some Administration and congressional aides say a broader defense of such R&D programs as the Energy Department's fusion-energy efforts, which face a cut of about one third in their \$350-million-a-year budget, could benefit from increased White House attention. To date, however, White House officials are not willing

to say what specific R&D cuts, if any, would provoke a veto. "We're involved in sending signals" to Capitol Hill, Tyson says. Adds Gibbons: "We're negotiating—this is a moving target."

Clinton will make a major address on science and technology on 18 October during the annual ceremony to honor winners of the National Medal of Science and National Medal of Technology (*Science*, 8 September, p. 1331). "He's consistently been a supporter" of R&D programs, says a Senate staffer involved in the effort to get the White House to threaten vetoes. But more than a speech will be required, he says, to ensure that science "doesn't fall through the cracks" in the press of other business.

—Andrew Lawler

TWO HOUSES DIVIDED OVER SCIENCE

Program	Agency	1995 Level	President's Request	House Level	Senate Level
National Ignition Facility	Energy	\$5 million	\$61 million	\$33.6 million	\$61 million
Stockpile Stewardship	Energy	\$1.46 billion	\$1.59 billion	\$1.35 billion	\$1.7 billion
Solar and renewable energy research	Energy	\$418 million	\$423 million	\$266 million	\$321 million
Mission to Planet Earth	NASA	\$1.34 billion	\$1.34 billion	\$1 billion	\$1.28 billion
Advanced Technology Program	Commerce	\$341 million	\$491 million	- 0 -	\$25 million
Landsat Remote Sensing	Commerce	- 0 -	\$12 million	- 0 -	\$10 million

Funding deadlock. The U.S. government's fiscal year starts on 1 October, but there's no champagne in sight to mark the occasion. The Republican Congress and the Democratic Administration are stalemated over the 1996 federal budget, and their efforts to strike a temporary truce that would allow the government to stay open into November could mean stopgap funding below current levels for many agencies. Wary of President Bill Clinton's veto threats, Republicans have postponed many of the House and Senate conferences that are intended to iron out a single version of a spending bill before sending it to the White House. The impasse affects billions of dollars in research funding; this table highlights the research-related programs where the two sides are furthest apart.

SOURCE: 1996 APPROPRIATIONS BILLS, U.S. CONGRESS