

Walker Sets Off Alarm Bells With Efforts to Rein In EOS

It's no secret that Representative Bob Walker (R-PA), the retiring chair of the House Science Committee, dislikes the controversial, multibillion-dollar Earth Observing System (EOS). He's been trying for a year to scale back the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) effort to monitor the planet's oceans, atmosphere, and land masses from space. But his latest attacks have not only angered supporters of the program; they've also raised the specter of politicians influencing scientific judgments about proposed research.

In recent weeks Walker has made a backdoor attempt to cut the EOS budget and has tried to promote the idea of a congressionally appointed task force to revise its scientific priorities. These moves have led to complaints from government officials and outside scientists that he is playing politics with global change research. The accusation is ironic, given that Walker and other Republicans have faulted Democrats like Vice President Al Gore for championing EOS as part of their environmental agenda.

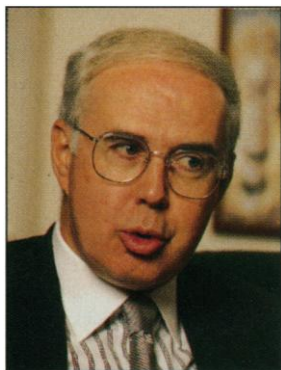
The EOS program has gone through a series of redesigns since it was first drawn up in the late 1980s, and Walker believes that NASA can no longer afford the current configuration of three large platforms, each supporting dozens of scientific instruments. He would prefer to have NASA gather the data using commercial satellites and advanced technology aboard smaller and cheaper spacecraft (*Science*, 1 September 1995, p. 1208). Last year, in an effort to win scientific backing for his concerns, Walker ordered up a comprehensive review of EOS by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). However, its report endorsed the program, even though it recommended a host of modifications to save money and called for a greater emphasis on smaller and more advanced sensors (*Science*, 22 September 1995, p. 1665).

Walker praised the report when it was issued, but he has now tempered his view. The academy study is "not the be-all and end-all," he told *Science* recently, adding that EOS remains "a mess." The problem with the report, say House staffers, is that it doesn't recognize that the growth of EOS threatens NASA's struggling space science program.

To address the budget problem, Walker wants to set up a nine-person EOS task force, with NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin,

Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Chair Larry Pressler (R-SD), and Walker each making three appointments. This proposal, contained in the House-passed version of a larger bill that sets policy for NASA, calls for a 6-month study to "re-evaluate, scientifically justify, and prioritize" the two dozen data sets NASA wants to collect. The bill would also deny funding for satellite construction unless Goldin certifies that the private sector could not provide the data in a timely manner.

The Senate has balked at the House version, largely because Pressler is a strong EOS supporter. The idea has also set off alarm



Task master. Walker wants politically appointed task force for EOS.

fort, which includes EOS. Allowing politicians rather than the academy to select program reviewers would be "an unfortunate precedent," he adds. Physicist Edward Frieman of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who chaired the board that oversaw the academy's study last year, is also disturbed by the idea. "We're quite concerned," he says. "If [Congress] would do this to one program, they could do it to all of them. This involves a set of principles that goes far beyond just this program."

Walker says such criticism is "based on a lack of understanding" of his proposal and that he sees the task force as a way to help the program survive a harsh budget climate. Frieman says the academy is prohibited from making detailed budget recommendations

and so may be unable to perform the sort of study Walker needs. But a House staff member says the task force approach is not aimed solely at gathering budget options. Its goal, says the aide, is to give politicians a "more honest and objective" look at the program.

But that goal is a slap in the academy's face, says Robert Watson, environment chief at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. He calls Walker's proposal "appalling," saying the report was done by "a totally unbiased panel that included skeptics" of the program. "He seems unfortunately not to have liked the answer [the panel] gave," says Watson. Watson dismisses the task force plan as "hypocritical, given [Walker's] view that this has been a politically driven program." And Watson maintains that the academy can provide general guidance on what science can be performed within a constrained budget.

With talks stalled over the policy bill, Walker recently took another approach to curbing EOS. On 25 January, in the midst of the frantic negotiations to avoid another government shutdown, Walker quietly asked House appropriators to include language in the latest continuing resolution that would have prevented the start of work on two EOS satellites. It also would have cut an additional \$75 million from the program's budget and set aside money for a study of the program's scientific requirements.

The unorthodox move failed, however, say congressional sources, when Senate staffers monitoring the bill objected to the add-ons. And it came as an unpleasant surprise to Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA), who chairs the House Appropriations subcommittee that funds NASA. "This was not a joint effort," says Lewis dryly. "I know of Bob's concern, and if he had his way, he would choose to eliminate funding" for the two satellites. But

Lewis says that the Senate is likely to block any attempt to do that.

Administration officials say they would be reluctant to accept the task force provision, and one said the president might veto the NASA policy bill if the final version includes it. The White House has also signaled its willingness to defend EOS by naming its parent initiative, the Mission to Planet Earth, as a favored program in the president's upcoming 1997 budget request. Although Walker seems unlikely to succeed in this round, Kennel warns global change researchers to be prepared for further attacks on EOS. And congressional aides and Administration officials agree that Walker's impending retirement is only likely to strengthen his resolve to re-

make the program in the coming months.

—Andrew Lawler



Who's in charge? NASA's Kennel says Congress should not set EOS's science agenda.