A Slippery Slope for Science

Despite its upbeat rhetoric about 1997, White House budget projections through 2000 paint a grim picture for science and technology

Every Administration tries to put the best spin on its budget request so that the good news appears to outweigh the bad. This year the Clinton White House is trying to do that in its discussion of R&D spending by focusing on its upbeat proposals for next year, rather than on the fiscal crisis projected for many areas of science by the close of the decade.

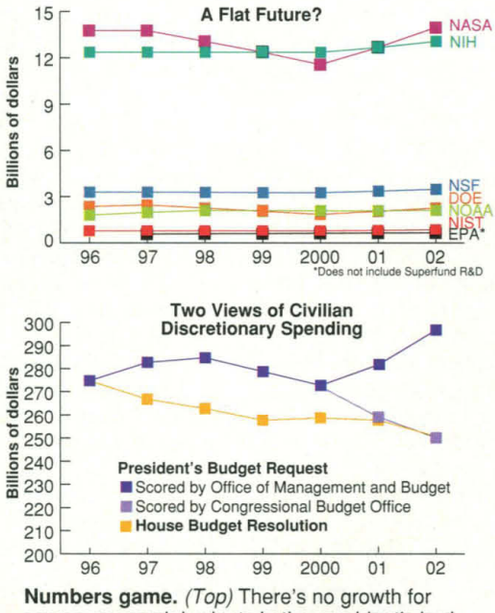
Last week, the White House submitted a 1997 request that would add $1 billion to overall spending on civilian R&D, including increases of about 4% for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) (*Science*, 22 March, p. 1658). These numbers, said President Clinton's science adviser, Jack Gibbons, prove that "the president steadfastly opposes cuts in science and technology." But buried in the fine print of the documents are projections that spell out sizable reductions for many science and technology programs as the government inches toward a balanced budget.

Normally, projections of spending in the so-called "out years" have little meaning. But budget analysts say that these figures indicate the severity of the budget squeeze facing science as a result of an agreement between the White House and the congressional leadership to balance the budget by 2002. Part of that agreement involves a cut of nearly $300 billion over the next 6 years in previously planned domestic discretionary spending—an assortment of programs that contains the entire $34 billion federal civilian R&D enterprise. (This year, domestic discretionary spending is running at about $255 billion.) "The [science and technology] budget is going down," acknowledges one White House official. "It is just a matter of how much."

Given that troubling message, it is not surprising that Administration officials are dwelling on the rosier near term rather than on the grimmer future. Harold Varmus, director of NIH, praises the "generous" increase requested in 1997 for his agency while professing little concern for the flat NIH budget projected for the rest of the decade. "The outyear numbers have changed every 6 months since I've been here," Varmus notes. "The one thing I've learned is that you worry about the [budget] year you're in, not the next year." Those at agencies whose budgets are projected to shrink are even more dismissive of the White House numbers beyond 1997. "It is merely a mechanical distribution of cuts," says Deputy Energy Secretary Charles Curtis about the declining numbers for his department's research activities. And Gibbons himself downplays the White House's own projections. "Those [outyear] numbers are not set in concrete," he said when the budget was unveiled.

Storm warnings

Ironically, that's not the tune Gibbons and other Administration officials were singing after Republicans passed a budget resolution last spring that projected a 33% cut in research over the next 7 years. Vice President Al Gore, for example, just last month lambasted those proposed cuts and promised that the Administration would provide "generous amounts" in funding compared with the Republican plan. Gibbons reinforced that message last week, saying Clinton "doesn't believe cutting science is a good way to head into the 21st century."



Numbers game. *(Top)* There's no growth for agency research budgets in the president's budget until after 2000. *(Bottom)* Republicans dispute White House economic estimates that shape trends in civilian spending.

But the Administration's own budget documents show that the White House projects substantial cuts in the late 1990s to a host of science and technology programs. For example, the Administration's figures show a decrease in spending, from $17.9 billion in 1997 to $14.6 billion in 2000, in a broad budget category called general science, space, and technology. That account includes most of the funding for the NSF, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and civilian research within the Department of Energy (DOE). By comparison, the Republican budget resolution approved by the House last May called for a sharp drop in 1997, to $16.3 billion, followed by more modest cuts that would leave the account at $14.9 billion by 2000. (None of these numbers takes into account inflation, which is projected to erode spending power by about 3% a year.)

Within this category, programs focused strictly on science and basic research would decrease from $4.5 billion in 1997 to $4 billion in 2000, according to the Clinton budget projections. Even more dramatic cuts are envisioned for space flight and supporting activities included in this account. That area would plummet from $13.4 billion next year to $10.5 billion in 2000.

As a result, NASA, which conducts both science and space-flight efforts, would be particularly hard hit, with a budget plunging from $13.8 billion in 1997 to $11.6 billion in 2000. Administrator Daniel Goldin, who has accepted major budget reductions imposed by the White House and Congress during recent years, told reporters last week that he planned to ignore the outyear figures for now and focus on his agency's 1997 budget.

NASA supporters such as Representatives George Brown (D–CA) and Jerry Lewis (R–CA) are taking the projected outyear cuts more seriously, however. Lewis, who chairs the House Appropriations panel which funds the agency, told *Science* that the numbers "are realistic" given the overall budget crunch, and he vowed to oppose such massive reductions. A similar message comes from White House budget analyst Steve Isakowitz, who warned a National Research Council panel recently that "this is a storm that is not going to pass."

DOE's science and technology programs also face a steep drop if the budget projections come to pass. They would decline from $2.5 billion in 1997 to $1.9 billion in 2000, and general science programs would fall from $1

Spring Rush on Capitol Hill

With the ink barely dry on President Bill Clinton's 1997 budget request, Congress is moving at a pace that leaves little room for all but the most essential legislation. The speed is due to a truncated budget season that began 6 weeks late—a casualty of the prolonged fight over spending for the current fiscal year—and that will end in time for lawmakers to go home in October and campaign for re-election.

The rush means that neither side will have much time to stake out new positions on R&D issues. Republicans again this year will push for increases in basic research at the expense of applied programs, while the Administration will continue to champion government and industry partnerships, say congressional staffers and agency officials. But there will be new twists on old fights.

The House Science Committee, for example, last week asked the House budget committee to call for a 5% increase in basic research in 1997. The budget panel is working feverishly on a resolution to guide appropriators when they divvy up 1997 federal spending later this spring. The big winners under the Science Committee plan would be the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) research account, the Department of Energy's general science program, and space science at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Overall, basic research for the civilian, nonmedical programs under its jurisdiction would rise from this year's $6.9 billion to $7.3 billion. The additional funding, say staffers, would come from applied programs like the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program (ATP), which many Republicans oppose.

In contrast, Clinton's budget continues the Administration's fight for programs that it says are essential to help companies transfer basic research findings into commercial products. That includes a $345 million request for ATP, which would return it to 1995 levels, as well as a $434 million environmental technologies initiative and a $288 million Partnership for a New Generation of Vehicles. "There's really been no change in our priorities," says Mary Good, Commerce undersecretary for technology. "With budgets as tight as they are, everything that's left is a priority."

The fast pace on the Hill also means that freshman Republicans are unlikely to make headway in their efforts to shut down the Energy and Commerce departments, or smaller agencies like the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). Commerce Secretary Ron Brown says, "The move to eliminate the department has lost all its momentum. We're here to stay." And USGS Director Gordon Eaton told the House interior appropriations subcommittee last week that "it's our sense we are off the endangered species list, at least for now."

–A.L.

billion in 1997 to $760 million in 2000. But Curtis plays down such proposed cuts, saying they "do not reflect policy judgments."

One policy judgment reflected in the budget document, to spare NSF, still means a slight drop in the agency's budget, from $3.33 billion in 1997 to $3.29 billion in 2000. NSF Director Neal Lane acknowledges that these no-growth numbers will "make it tough for the agency to reach its long-range goals," but he says that a more serious impediment to planning is the continued absence of a final budget for 1996.

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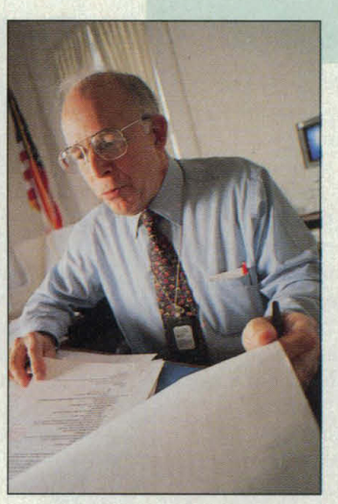
—Jack Gibbons



RICK KOZAK

How real?

It is hard to get a clear view of overall science and technology spending in the Administration's long-term spending plan, in part because the voluminous budget documents do not discuss outyear budgets for programs in the same way they are presented for 1997. Gibbons and other Administration officials cite a projected upturn that would begin in 2001 as the bright spot in their fuzzy long-term R&D picture. In 2000, the science adviser says, "we'll see how we're doing with deficit reduction." If substantial inroads have been made, "then we could spend more money on discretionary [programs] in 2001 and 2002."

The catch is that those increases hinge on optimistic economic assumptions by the White House Office of Management and Budget that some congressional staffers say are unrealistic. And both White House and congressional budget analysts admit that it is nearly impossible to predict the state of the economy, much less the federal budget, in 2001. "Those are the baloney numbers," one Administration official says.

Whether the proposed cuts actually materialize is likely to hinge on public attitudes toward eliminating the deficit. If the push to balance the budget that propelled Republicans to power in the House and Senate in 1994 remains strong, politicians are more likely to press for cuts to areas like science as the price to pay to kill the deficit monster. However, if the public appears unenthusiastic about further reductions, the radical cuts proposed for future years may never happen. "It all depends on how seriously you take talk of balancing the budget," says David Moore, a Congressional Budget Office analyst.

Yet no matter what the outcome of the November elections, the longer term picture for most science and technology agencies is unambiguously ominous. "When it came time to put together an enemies list last year, no one had to look to science," says David Goldston, legislative director for Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY), a self-proclaimed "cheerleader" for NSF and basic science. "It wasn't on anyone's radar screens. There is a whiny lament that people are targeting science, but that's remarkably inaccurate."

Goldston and other congressional staffers warn, however, that this relatively benign environment is coming to an end. They cite the upcoming retirements of old science hands, such as Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), who chairs the House Science Committee, and Senator Mark Hatfield (R–OR), the Senate Appropriations Committee chair who has consistently fought for NIH funding. However, most counsel skepticism when it comes to budget forecasts. "Don't expect the projections of either party to last through the elections," predicts Brown. "There will be major revisions." While Goldston doesn't expect to see cuts of the magnitude proposed last year by Congress, he anticipates reductions that "will be large and unpleasant." In that sense, he adds, "the outyear numbers are real."

–Andrew Lawler