

Partisan Battle Mars Markup Of Joint Authorization Bill

A senior Republican accuses his Democratic rival of slander. Democrats charge Republicans with distorting the budget process. Life on the presidential campaign trail? No, this was the House Science Committee last week as it met to set policy for funding most civilian, nonmedical research agencies.

What emerged from the rancorous 9-hour session was a bill to authorize 1997 R&D spending for NASA, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Commerce Department, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at a level \$1.2 billion lower than President Clinton requested and \$600 million below what those agencies can spend this year (see box). It could have been worse: The total is \$430 million higher than the House Budget Committee projected last year for 1997. And the bill would boost basic re-

search spending by about \$250 million over current levels—although the two sides disagree on what fits into this category—while taking a large bite out of global-change studies and industrial partnership efforts. “I’ve seen to it that science gets its fair share—or more than its fair share,” said Representative Robert Walker (R-PA), who chairs the science panel and is second in command on the budget panel.

The authorization bill offers guidance to House appropriators who assign actual spending levels; this year it also reflects the results of House Budget Committee deliberations, not yet public when the committee met, on how to divide up the overall \$1.5 trillion federal budget. That secrecy, plus the fact that the panel’s subcommittees did not mark-

up agency budgets first, put the Democrats in a foul mood at last week’s meeting. “This may be the epitome of streamlining,” grouched ranking minority Representative George Brown (D-CA). “Maybe we could do without the committee and maybe even the Congress.”

The Republicans say they are rushing to finish, perhaps as soon as next week, before House appropriators start their work, and they blame their late start on a 2-month delay in submitting the president’s budget. “If we want to have an impact, we have to move now,” said Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI).

Environmental programs, from NASA’s Mission to Planet Earth (MTPE) to EPA global climate research, were a particular flash point at the meeting. Brown said Republicans were hypocritical for cutting EPA and Commerce environmental programs in a week when the House leadership was touting its pro-environment stance. “Instead of being clean and green, they proved themselves to simply be mean and extreme,” said Brown. He and others were also upset at the \$370 million cut proposed in the \$1.4 billion MTPE program request to build satellites and a data system that can give global-change researchers a fuller picture of Earth’s environment. “Its current funding levels are just not sustainable,” replied Walker, and threaten space science. NASA’s overall budget would drop accordingly, to \$13.5 billion. Brown also disputed the Republicans’ decision to omit MTPE in their list of basic research projects and questioned Walker’s motives in cutting the program. During further debate on the program, Walker accused Brown of calling him a liar.

The committee authorized \$3.25 billion for NSF, \$75 million below the president’s request and about \$30 million above the final 1996 level. The bill would also force NSF to eliminate one of its seven directorates, a move believed to be aimed at the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences directorate. The panel also approved changing NSF’s name to the National Science and Engineering Foundation.

There were a few small cracks in the mostly solid front that Walker has built. Lawmakers did not vote on a new authorization for Energy Department research programs because Republicans are deeply divided over proposed cuts in areas ranging from fusion to fossil-fuel work. And Democrats came close to wooing enough Republican votes to stave off the proposed elimination of Commerce’s Advanced Technology Program, for which Clinton has requested \$345 million. But individual budgets aside, perhaps the most important message from last week’s meeting was that the committee’s tradition of bipartisanship is in tatters and is not likely to be mended soon.

—Andrew Lawler



Science Gains in Final '96 Budget



With only 5 months to go in the fiscal year, President Bill Clinton and the Republican Congress have finally agreed on a 1996 budget. And the wait paid off for some of those science agencies lurching along on temporary spending bills since October.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) came away with \$40 million more for its research account than Congress approved last fall in a bill vetoed by the president. “I am immensely relieved and pleased,” says NSF Director Neal Lane about an overall \$3.2 billion budget that’s \$8 million smaller than in 1995.

NASA also fared better, winning an extra \$83 million for its science, aeronautics, and technology account. At the same time, the agency’s travel budget was cut by \$19 million to pay NASA’s share of an across-the-board tax levied by Congress to offset additional spending in the bill. These changes put NASA’s budget at \$13.89 billion, almost \$100 million higher than Clinton’s 1997 request and almost \$400 million above what the House Science Committee proposes for next year.

Congress also ordered the agency to halt steps toward laying off half of its headquarters personnel until lawmakers review the move. The reductions—which agency managers proposed without consultations with the White House or Congress—could hurt NASA’s ability to manage its programs, according to legislative language adopted at the urging of Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD).

Even the Commerce Department’s Advanced Technology Program, a centerpiece of the Administration’s science and technology efforts that Republicans had zeroed out, was awarded \$221 million, primarily to continue current government-industry partnerships. It’s still a big cut, however: Congress originally appropriated \$431 million in 1995, a figure that the new Republican Congress shrank to \$341 million in the first step of what they hoped would be its burial march. The Environmental Protection Agency, another target of Republicans, came away with \$525 million for research, a 10% cut from 1995 levels and the same amount as in last fall’s bill.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will receive the same budget—\$1.85 billion—that Congress had earlier appropriated, below the \$1.96 billion for 1995. But it loses its \$7 million share of the Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment program, a favorite of Vice President Al Gore.

—A.L.