CONGRESS

Panel Would Block LHC, Internet Funds

A House panel wants to defer U.S. plans to participate in Europe's Large Hadron Collider (LHC) and upgrade the Internet. These surprise moves are contained in a raft of bills introduced last week to authorize 1998 programs for most civilian, nonmedical research agencies. The bills, which were scheduled to be voted on this week by the House Science Committee, in general would provide a bit more breathing room for science. They are, however, just the first steps in a long congressional process for establishing budgets for 1998.

The committee intends to deny the Department of Energy (DOE) the $35 million it wants next year to help build the LHC. Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), who chairs the panel and hopes to meet this week with CERN officials in Geneva, is said to be skeptical of the deal that DOE has struck with the Europeans. Along with panel member Representative Joe Barton (R–TX), he remains bitter about Europe's failure to back the ill-fated Superconducting Super Collider (*Science*, 14 March, p. 1555).

Lawmakers also worry that LHC funding will hurt U.S. facilities, such as the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) in California, which focuses on electron-positron collisions. While denying funds for the collider, the House measure would add $10 million to SLAC's $131 million budget. The boost follows a recent visit to SLAC by Representative Ken Calvert (R–CA), who believes that money for the LHC would be better spent on domestic programs.

DOE officials and many physicists oppose such a shift. "It would be a bad thing for the U.S. to abandon this piece of physics entirely to the Europeans," says James Strait, a physicist at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois, who works on the LHC. The House appropriations committee, which approves spending bills (see p. 343), and the Senate have yet to weigh in on the LHC contribution, and at this point there is no indication that they share the science panel's concerns.

Another committee target is a $100 million proposal to design a successor to today's Internet that would offer researchers faster and better connections (*Science*, 7 March, p. 1412). The panel wants the Administration to draw up a more detailed plan for the interagency program, announced during last fall's election campaign, and to discuss it at a hearing before authorizing any funding. "We would be happy to work with the committee," says White House aide Thomas Kalil, "and we hope that when we're done, they'll be as excited about the initiative as we are."

Despite these reservations, the committee is fairly generous to overall agency budgets. NASA's budget for 1998 would rise slightly to $13.8 billion, rather than falling as the president requested. But the controversial Mission to Planet Earth would be chopped to $1.1 billion, a decrease of $200 million, to pay for work on an advanced space vehicle. DOE would receive $15 million more than the Administration's $225 million request for fusion-energy sciences.

Elsewhere, the National Science Foundation would be authorized at $3.5 billion, $138 million more than it requested. The committee has proposed a 5.4% boost in its research account and full funding for its proposed $120 million South Pole Station renovation, topping the Administration's 3.4% boost in research and $25 million down payment on the new station. The Environmental Protection Agency's research shop would receive an increase of 9%, about equal to the Administration's request, to $557 million. The Advanced Technology Program within the Commerce Department would receive $189 million, short of its $275 million request and below this year's level.

Whether such increases actually materialize depends in large part on the outcome of negotiations between Congress and the White House on a balanced budget. Those talks will provide an overall framework for the appropriations committees to write the actual spending bills for each agency.

–Andrew Lawler

With reporting by Jocelyn Kaiser and Jeffrey Mervis.

NASA

Science May Gain in Station Melee

The first piece of the international space station was supposed to be heading into orbit this year, but instead, the program is on shakier ground than ever. NASA's decision last week to postpone the initial launch by a full year because Russia won't be able to produce a key piece of hardware on time is embarrassing. But a more serious political threat to the $30 billion project is the agency's announcement that it is ready to part company with Russia completely in building the station. Such a decision could cost U.S. taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars—the cost of facilities that Russia had promised to build—and possibly the support of Congress, which could decide the project isn't worth the cost.

Ironically, the delay could give life and microgravity scientists a chance to put experiments aboard as many as three additional space-shuttle missions. Researchers had been looking at a 3-year drought in science because of NASA's decision to postpone research until construction of the station was largely completed. The news has calmed researchers worried that a long hiatus would leave them ill prepared to conduct space-station experiments (*Science*, 14 March, p. 1558). Extra flights will at least "conserve the vitality of U.S. research" while preparing scientists for the station era, says Claude Canizares, an astrophysicist who chairs the National Research Council's Space Studies Board.

Winning over Congress may not be so easy, however. NASA officials told the House Science Committee last week that they are delaying the initial launch because the Russian government has failed to fund construction of the station's service module. Lawmakers are furious—at the Russian government for breaking its repeated funding pledges, at NASA for wanting more money to compensate for Russian-caused delays, and at the White House for letting the problem fester. Winning continued support for the station later this spring will be difficult, supporters and opponents agree, if NASA can no longer promise robust Russian participation, a fixed schedule, and level costs.

The current situation is a far cry from what the Clinton Administration envisioned in 1993, when the White House embraced Russia as a partner in a move estimated to shave $2 billion off the $19.4 billion budgeted to build the lab, beginning with a launch in 1997. "The program is falling apart around us because of the Russians," says Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), who chairs the House Science Committee. Last week, the chair of the committee's space panel, Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R–CA), denounced Russian officials as "nincompoops" and "dunderheads." He said, "They will pay for their mistakes, not the people of the United States." One Russian official admits that funding has been a problem, but says that the issue should be resolved by the end of the month.

Sensenbrenner met Monday with Vice President Al Gore to discuss the controversy, but nothing was resolved. NASA will give Russia until next month to meet its commitment, space flight chief Wilbur Trafton told lawmakers.

Giving Russia the shove, however, may further delay the project. NASA managers