Blunt Talk From Science Chair

In an exclusive interview with *Science*, Science Committee Chair James Sensenbrenner warns that the outlook for R&D spending is precarious and that CERN and space-station agreements are in trouble

Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI) is the first to admit he is no science whiz. "The only D [grade] I got at my university was in biology," recalls the 10-term federal legislator and attorney, who graduated with a degree in political science from Stanford University in 1965. "That was from Don Kennedy, who went on to become president." Years later, when Kennedy was hauled before Congress to explain the university's misuse of government funds meant to pay for research overhead, "I mentioned to him that what goes around, comes around."

What came around this January was Sensenbrenner's ascension to the chair of the House Science Committee after 16 years on the panel. Drawing on that experience, he has moved quickly to exercise leadership over a panel that oversees NASA, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Department of Energy's civilian science programs, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, research at the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In less than 5 months, he has transformed it from a den of partisan bickering into a smoothly operating committee. Proof of that harmony came last month, when Democrats and Republicans worked together and achieved House passage of several bills authorizing 1998 nonmedical civilian R&D spending.

But cooperation doesn't mean meekness. Sensenbrenner has not abandoned his trademark bluntness and tenacity, shaking up supporters of major science and technology efforts like the international space station and the European Large Hadron Collider (LHC) by raising uncomfortable questions. And despite his penny-pinching views on overall federal spending, Sensenbrenner has fought hard for a proposed 3% increase this year in the R&D budgets of the agencies under his jurisdiction.

It's not a position the congressman imagined holding when he came to Washington in 1979 after a decade in the Wisconsin legislature. Indeed, Republican leaders put him on the committee precisely because he had few R&D connections. "They wanted someone with an independent voice on science policy, who was not dragged down with a large concentration of employees or researchers directly dependent on federal appropriations," he says. His district north and west of Milwaukee lacks any major research universities, aerospace contractors, or government labs—the sort of constituents that typically attract lawmakers to the panel.

The result, according to his colleagues and staff, is a straight-talking chair with few axes to grind, who despises pork-barrel politics and has little patience for the ideological turf battles that characterized the panel under his predecessor, Representative Robert Walker (R–PA). "He's firm but fair," says Representative George Brown (D–CA), the ranking minority member of the panel and himself a former chair. "He has bent over backward to consult with us." Sensenbrenner is also not the glad-hander and well-known figure that Walker was. He avoids breakfast meetings and receptions when he can. "He's not what you would call a glamorous member," says Brown. "But he's well respected, and he's making an effort to soften his image as a loner."

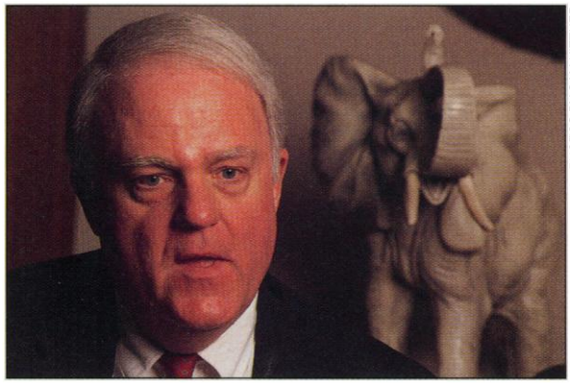
The 53-year-old congressman admits that he's still not totally at ease with the panel's constituency. "I give speeches and see their expressions of, 'How does he know what he's talking about? He doesn't have any educational background or experience in what we do.' " To compensate, he has asked Representative Vern Ehlers (R–MI)—a former professor of physics at Calvin College in Michigan—to act as his liaison with researchers.

Yet, that lack of knowledge hasn't stopped him from demanding that taxpayers get their money's worth from big science. "He's almost obsessive in his desire to oversee large science programs," says Brown. CERN chief Christopher Llewellyn Smith found that out after he suggested privately to Sensenbrenner last year that U.S. researchers might lose access to the Geneva high-energy physics facility if the United States failed to help build the LHC. "I told him Congress does not respond to such threats," says the lawmaker. Since then, Sensenbrenner has pushed the Clinton Administration to renegotiate its $450 million LHC agreement with CERN (*Science*, 18 April, p. 347).

He also enjoys traveling overseas—sometimes at his own expense—to visit Russia or CERN to learn firsthand about a project and to pressure foreign science managers and politicians. And he is proud of a recent visit to Antarctica that reinforced an NSF plan to build a new, lower cost South Pole station (*Science*, 21 March, p. 1732).

In his first in-depth interview since he became chair of the committee, Sensenbrenner spoke with *Science* editors last week in his office in the Rayburn House Office Building. What follows is an edited transcript.

–Andrew Lawler



PHOTOS BY SAM KITTNER

No party animal. Sensenbrenner wins high marks for fairness from Democrats on his committee.

Q: *What effect will the balanced budget agreement have on R&D spending?*

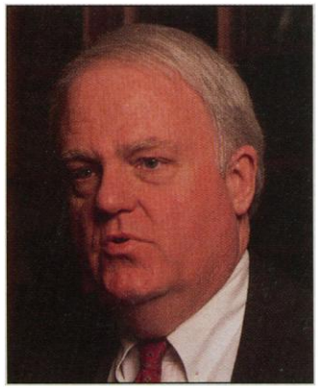
A: It is too early to say, but it's very important to make sure that the [$225 billion added to estimated revenues over the next 5 years] is real money. If it is not, discretionary programs are going to take an extremely vicious hit in the last 2 years of this agreement. Congress is not going to break its promise on the balanced budget—it will simply take it out of discretionary spending.

Q: *How did you come up with your proposed 3% increase in R&D spending for 1998 for the agencies under your jurisdiction?*

A: In March, the [House] Budget Committee staff was looking at a 5% cut from 1997 levels for scientific spending. That would have devastated science. The 3% level was an acceptable compromise between the freeze that some Republican members thought we could live with and the 7% increase that [Representative] George Brown and a Senate bill called for. It was realistic and it was salable.

Q: *If the Senate fails yet again to pass any authorization bills for science agencies, is all your work for nothing?*

A: We are, by far, the first committee to finish our authorization work. Mr. Brown and I are going to the Senate to tell the authorizers that it is vitally important that the bills be passed and sent to the president, lest we completely abdicate our responsibility in setting policy. I've already met with [Majority Leader Trent] Lott [R–MS], and he has expressed his desire to get authorization bills out, and I will meet with [Commerce Committee Chair John McCain (R–AZ) and William Frist (R–TN), chair of the panel's science subcommittee]. I think this can be done without tying up significant Senate floor time.



Sounds of science. Researchers should explain their work in "plain English," says Sensenbrenner.

Q: *Do R&D advocates have a strong enough voice in the White House?*

A: I have a very high regard for [presidential science adviser] Jack Gibbons, [but] he has not been as assertive as he has been in the past. This is a White House problem.

Q: *How do you intend to carry out your pledge to oversee agencies more thoroughly?*

A: The Government Performance and Results Act goes into effect 30 September, and we will monitor each agency to make sure they're accomplishing their goals. This will be good for science, because it will very clearly show what the scientific agencies want to accomplish and will be able to measure how they are using taxpayers' dollars to accomplish that. The best way to avoid Golden Fleece awards and investigative reports is to speak in plain English, say what you're doing, and show the taxpayers you are doing that.

Q: *What agencies need the most oversight?*

A: Obviously, NASA and the Department of Energy (DOE) will. And we will continue to put the [Commerce Department's] Advanced Technology Program [ATP] on a glide path to better management.

Q: *How supportive are you of ATP?*

A: It has been woefully mismanaged. The program has got more money than it knows what to do with, but we all want to use tax dollars to leverage more private-sector dollars and therefore increase the total pot that is available for research. We're going to get this program into shape so it does not become a lightning rod for people who wish to point out fraud, waste, and abuse in federal programs. ... I am not opposed to the philosophy behind ATP, [unless] it is government money replacing money that would come from the private sector.

Q: *Has your pressure on the White House to ensure Russia meets its space-station obligations had an effect?*

A: The money [to build station parts] is now flowing in Russia, although I don't know how much of that was the result of me being on their back almost continuously for the last year and a half. It's a step in the right direction, although it's not flowing in the amounts and according to the deadlines in the promises made by President Yeltsin last month.

My concern is that NASA moves the goalposts [on what the Russians are expected to do] every time there is a Russian failure. If NASA continues to be in denial, sooner or later the cost overruns will be enough to kill this program. And I think that would be a shame.

Q: *Why are you so intransigent about the proposed LHC agreement with CERN?*

A: Members of Congress repeatedly went to Europe for help on the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC). Former CERN Director-General Carlo Rubbia was usually in advance of the American delegations talking to European governments, saying, 'Don't give the SSC a dime. If the SSC falls apart, the Americans will be back to help us build the LHC.' My colleagues who got involved in that fiasco have not forgotten.

Q: *Is a deal still possible?*

A: I am going to try to broker a compromise, but a lot depends upon Europe—and whether the U.S. high-energy physics community realizes that the deal with CERN is a bad one. First, the Europeans keep on saying that if America does not do what Europe wants it to do, they will kick the American researchers out of CERN. We are subject to any change in policy of the CERN council. This should be a contractual agreement, so that U.S. researchers have unlimited access. Second, CERN is not making noises about kicking the Russians out. There needs to be symmetry in the treatment of the United States and Russia.

Third, CERN has a buy-American-last policy, and, fourth, they have not included contingency costs in the LHC price tag. I can imagine CERN approaching us in 3 or 4 years suggesting that we [help cover a cost overrun] lest they build a less capable machine. That will be a deal killer. Congress will withhold U.S. funding, I can guarantee that.

Q: *Do you approve of DOE Secretary Federico Peña's recent decision to cancel the Associated Universities Inc. contract to run Brookhaven National Laboratory?*

A: Yes. When there is a failure that impacts safety, then cancellation is a legitimate response. We plan oversight hearings on this next month or July.

Q: *Does this signal that DOE labs need a major revamping?*

A: Some—but not all—DOE labs have been fishing around for jobs to do following the end of the Cold War. What [NASA Administrator] Dan Goldin did in designating NASA centers as centers of excellence, to concentrate in particular areas, is something that ought to be applied to the DOE labs. If it isn't done that way, I can see Congress, in its move to balance the budget, starting to close DOE labs simply because there has been so much free-lancing to get more work as a way to keep people on the payroll.

Q: *Why are you so skeptical of international projects? Are you a midwestern isolationist?*

A: I am not a midwestern isolationist, but I want to make sure America gets a good deal with its international science arrangements. I support internationalizing projects like the space station because they can be too expensive for any single country. But it has to be a real partnership.

Q: *Why does the biomedical field fare so much better in dollar terms?*

A: Biomedical scientists have been more successful than civilian researchers in other areas because the Commerce Committee [which has jurisdiction over biomedical matters] is one of the exclusive committees. And, secondly, everybody wants to be healthier. Everyone wants the miracle cure for diseases that debilitate and kill. If I had my druthers, I would like to see all civilian research in the Science Committee, but I'm not asking for that. The Commerce Committee has always been one of the most powerful committees in the Congress.

Q: *Are you enjoying the job?*

A: Yes. I found it is a lot more work than I anticipated, but the types of people I have come in contact with are really awe-inspiring. [On a visit to CERN], my 15-year-old son got a power-physics lecture from [Nobel laureate and MIT physicist] Sam Ting. He's one of the few Nobel laureates I have come into contact with who is able to explain what he's doing in plain English.