U.S. SCIENCE POLICY

House Study Tackles New Era in R&D

As a physicist, Representative Vern Ehlers (R–MI) is comfortable working with theoretical models. But as vice chair of the House Science Committee, he lives in the realm of the practical. Over the next year, Ehlers intends to tap both worlds as he carries out a request by House Republican leaders to formulate a new policy on U.S. support for science that will serve the community and satisfy both Congress and the White House.

Fresh look. Ehlers says new study will "keep it simple."

Ehlers is a rare breed: a scientist-turned-politician. He has a Ph.D. in nuclear physics and taught at Calvin College in Michigan before being elected to the state legislature in 1985 and the U.S. Congress in 1994. Last week, he outlined his plans for the science policy study before a meeting of the Science Coalition, a group of university and industry science advocates, whose members offered cautious support for his effort. Observers say it is too early in the process to predict whether the new study will leave a more lasting mark on policy than previous reports.

The study hopes to come to grips with the impact on science of the end of the Cold War and the grim reality of budget constraints, according to Ehlers. "We no longer can say that we must do research or the Russians will get ahead of us," he noted. At the same time, he said, the fragile ties between basic and applied research need to be strengthened, large international projects require better coordination, and scientists must take a much more active political role: "We need a fresh look at the role of research in society."

Ehlers says he wants to encourage more partnerships between the federal government and states, industry, universities, and foreign nations. He also cited the Department of Agriculture's cooperative extension services as a model for turning discoveries into products that benefit society. "We need that for other sciences as well ... to diffuse knowledge more rapidly."

Ehlers hopes to keep his study short and concise. He is struggling to win funding for only one full-time staff member and will hold a minimum of public events. "We've had enough hearings [on this topic] in the last decade," he said, referring to an effort by the House Science Committee in 1985–86 that conducted nearly 20 hearings and generated a dozen papers but never a final report. "I'm deliberately trying to keep it simple."

The first step, said Ehlers, will be a roundtable—likely in September—bringing together 40 or so "fairly high-level scientists" to develop ideas and formulate an agenda for the study. Their work would be circulated and then vetted at a public hearing in an effort to win the backing of political leaders and the scientific community. "It's not going to have any impact unless Congress and the Administration buy into it," he added.

Ehlers asked for help in making a case for the value of continued federal support for science. "Scientists have to be more active," he said. "They can't be priests of a cult who descend from a mountain [periodically] and say, 'I need money.' " He noted that it took researchers years to discover that the Internet was not only a way for scientists to communicate but also a tool to talk with the public and Congress.

Science Coalition members say they welcome the new study and wish him well. "It's a daunting task, but an essential one," says Jack Crowley, lobbyist for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has helped to organize the science coalition. Democrats, meanwhile, are keeping close tabs on the effort. Representative George Brown (D–CA), ranking minority member of the Science Committee, says the review could help shape the debate over R&D spending and that the study "ought to be bipartisan." Brown says he plans to suggest topics that Ehlers might address.

–Andrew Lawler

APPROPRIATIONS BILL

House Panel Boosts NSF, NASA, EPA

The first major science spending bill for 1998 to start moving through Congress contains good news for researchers. But federal officials and lobbyists are cautioning that funding levels approved last week by a House subcommittee for NASA, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and other agencies could be reduced as the bill grinds its way through the congressional mill. "It's wonderful, but we'll see if it lasts," says Howard Silver, chair of the Coalition for NSF Funding, an advocacy group. "I think there are probably a lot of people taking credit for this mark."

The appropriations bill, for the fiscal year that begins on 1 October, would increase NSF's overall budget by 6.6%, to $3.49 billion. That's $120 million more than the president's request, and close to a 7% target set by a coalition of scientific societies (*Science*, 21 February, p. 1055). The lion's share of that added boost is a $90 million allocation to build a new South Pole research station that would replace a deteriorating 20-year-old facility. The research account would rise by 4.3%, to $2.54 billion; education activities would go up by 2%, to $633 million; and two new facilities—a millimeter array and a polar-cap observatory—would move ahead as planned.

For NASA, the subcommittee provided $148 million more than the $13.5 billion presidential request, although the figure falls short of the agency's current budget. Two-thirds of the added funds would go to cover unanticipated increases in space station costs caused by Russian delays in building station hardware. The panel also said NASA could move another $150 million from other agency accounts into the space station budget if necessary. The remaining $48 million of the increase above the request would be spread out among a host of science, aeronautics, and technology programs, including NASA's new Space Biomedical Institute in Houston and the National Space Grant Colleges and Fellowships program.

The science and technology account at EPA also fared well, receiving $656 million—$41 million above the president's request. That includes $35 million for research on the health effects of particulate matter—which will more than double what EPA now spends—and $5 million more for ozone research, both to support new air-quality standards.

For all three agencies, the tougher fight will be in the Senate, where legislators will have almost half a billion dollars less to spend on the same bill, which also funds politically popular housing and veterans' programs. The appropriators "are making us temporarily cheerful, but in the long run, we may have more to cry about," says Representative George Brown (D–CA), the ranking minority member of the House Science Committee.

The House Appropriations Committee is scheduled to take up the bill next week, with the Senate panel expected to swing into action later this month.

–Andrew Lawler and Jeffrey Mervis

With additional reporting by Jocelyn Kaiser.