APPROPRIATIONS BILLS

NIH Leads Research Gains As Congress Picks Up Pace

Trying to make up for a slow start, Congress moved ahead last week on several 1998 spending bills in hopes of completing most of its budget work before a monthlong recess in August. Science programs fared relatively well in last week's votes, easing fears that the government's new plan to balance the budget by 2002 would spark a round of cuts to R&D programs.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), as expected, is emerging once more as federal science's big winner, with the National Science Foundation (NSF) again enjoying modest growth. The good news is also spreading to other agencies that have suffered spending cuts in the past few years. Magnetic fusion actually won a boost in the Senate, and committees in both houses approved money for U.S. participation in Europe's Large Hadron Collider project. There were a few skirmishes over science funding, however. In separate House debates, members punished NSF for awarding a grant to study why qualified candidates decline to run for Congress and soundly rejected funding for a new windstorm research center that critics labeled pork-barrel spending. At the same time, a Senate panel provided NSF with a $40 million plant genome initiative it had not requested (*Science*, 27 June, p. 1960).

What follows is a summary of congressional actions during the past week. House and Senate members will meet in September to work out their differences.

■ **NIH: 6% and rising.** The news continues to be good for biomedical researchers. A House funding panel voted to give NIH a raise of 6% in 1998, which would boost its budget to $13.5 billion. The proposed hike—$764.5 million—is more than twice the increase sought by the president. The biggest winners would be human genome research, with a proposed 12% increase, and the diabetes institute, with a hike of 7.5%. To offer such a raise without breaking a congressional spending limit, the subcommittee cut other programs in its jurisdiction, including education and labor projects championed by the White House. The bill is expected to clear the House Appropriations Committee this week and go to the floor before recess. Meanwhile, a Senate subcommittee chaired by Arlen Specter (R–PA)—who has said he wants a 7.5% raise for NIH—planned to mark up its bill this week.

■ **NSF: Growth with strings.** The first major science spending bill to clear the House would raise NSF's $3.367 billion total request by $120 million. A Senate panel last week was not quite so generous, adding just $10 million. The discrepancy is largely due to $90 million in the House version to fully fund a new South Pole station. But both bodies took pokes at the agency's merit-review process.

The House made a symbolic cut of $174,000 in NSF's overall research account to protest a grant to two political scientists to study why many qualified candidates don't run for Congress (*Science*, 4 July, p. 28). Representative Jerry Lewis (R–CA), chair of the House spending panel that oversees NSF, says the move is intended to send a "message" that the grant was a "misstep ... in the applications process." The House stopped short, however, of telling NSF not to fund the study. In a discussion on the House floor, Representative Barney Frank (D–MA) defended the study and accused his colleagues of acting "as a kind of appellate research council." But Representative George Brown (D–CA) scolded NSF for failing to "prepare" members for what he labeled a topic "of great delicacy." Joseph Bordogna, acting NSF deputy director, says the proposal passed muster with peer reviewers and that "NSF is confident that the research is being done properly."

The Senate panel took the opposite tack: It directed NSF to spend money on something it had not requested. Senator Kit Bond (R–MO), chair of the Senate panel that oversees NSF, hailed the $40 million plant genome initiative as "critical to future food production and human health." NSF officials say they support the concept but are unhappy with the size of the proposed effort, pointing out that they already fund several million dollars' worth of research on various plant genomes. "It's a rational idea," says Bordogna, "but the question is how to do it with constrained resources." The Senate panel also told NSF to spell out what it hopes to accomplish in initiatives relating to computer networking and life in extreme environments, totaling almost half a billion dollars, before it would release the money.

■ **Department of Defense (DOD): Upward march.** The military appears headed for a budget increase this year slightly larger than what the president wanted, and basic research could benefit. On 15 July, the Senate passed a bill that would raise DOD's overall budget to $247.2 billion, about $3.2 billion more than the Administration requested. Within that total, R&D would increase 0.9% to $37.4 billion, and basic research would rise to $1.17 billion, an 8.7% boost. This is about $10 million more than the White House sought. The Senate bill also contains some specific earmarks for medical studies in the Army budget, including $175 million—$69 million more than this year—for "peer-reviewed breast cancer research" and $5 million for prostate cancer diagnostics, added to $38 million appropriated last year. The House Appropriations Committee takes up its version of the bill this week.

■ **NASA: Better than expected.** Science Committee Chair James Sensenbrenner (R–WI) tried to cut $100 million in the agency's funding bill that NASA wanted to make up for Russian delays in building its portion of the international space station. But Lewis, whose panel also oversees NASA, said the move could derail the partnership with Russia and leave NASA with more delays and higher costs in the long run. The cut was rejected by a vote of 227 to 200. Meanwhile, a Senate panel approved $13.5 billion for the agency in 1998; while that is $148 million below the House level, it is the same as NASA's request and higher than most observers expected, given the Senate's tight funding allocation.

■ **Wind project blown apart.** It's not often that a pork-barrel project is so overwhelmingly defeated on the House floor. After a rancorous debate, lawmakers voted by a margin of three to one to kill $60 million earmarked for a windstorm research center and to shift the money to the veterans' medical care account. Led by Representatives Roger Wicker (R–MS) and Carrie Meek (D–FL), House members from regions affected by hurricanes argued that the $180 million facility was needed to study the effects of wind on homes and materials. A Department of Energy (DOE) lab with a large amount of land in a remote part of Idaho was to be the center's home. But opponents argued that it was pork because the Administration did not request the center, it had not been peer reviewed, and the contract to build it would not be competed. "Here we have an uncooked idea, a half-baked idea," complained Representative John Olver (D–MA).

■ **Fusion: A glimmer of support.** Magnetic fusion fared well in the full Senate, gaining $15 million above its $225 million request and $8 million above its 1997 level. The House funding panel provided the requested amount. Both the Senate and the House panel also provided $55 million for the last year of design work on the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, a proposed

$10 billion fusion project. DOE officials feared the House panel planned to cut some or all of the funding, although House staffers deny any move to kill the project. Even so, Energy Secretary Federico Peña says he worked hard to save it. "It would reflect poorly on our nation if the United States did not fulfill its last year of obligation," he told reporters. Both bodies also set aside $35 million for DOE's participation in Europe's Large Hadron Collider project, although the House panel would first like a detailed report on the U.S.–European agreement.

■ **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Above the bar.** Science and technology would receive $600 million in the Senate panel's version. While that's $56 million less than the House has allotted and $15 million below the president's request, it's still 9% higher than its current budget of $552 million. The Senate mark adds $8 million to EPA's request for particulate air-pollution research, a $19 million program that the House boosted by $35 million.

–Andrew Lawler, Eliot Marshall, Jeffrey Mervis, and Jocelyn Kaiser

ANIMALS IN RESEARCH

Chimp Retirement Plan Proposed

In their native habitats, chimpanzees are dwindling toward extinction. But in a little-known legacy of the AIDS pandemic, U.S. biomedical research facilities have filled to bursting with the primates—some 1500 in all. In a report released on 16 July, an expert panel organized by the National Research Council has now weighed in on the chimpanzee overpopulation problem, recommending a long-term plan that observers describe as humane but problematic.

Rejecting as unethical the easiest option—euthanasia—the panel recommends that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) create an autonomous body, the Chimpanzee Management Program (ChiMP), to acquire the approximately 1000 chimps the government already partially or wholly supports and shelter them for the rest of their lives. (The remaining 500 chimps are in the hands of private research labs.)

Both research-colony administrators and animal-welfare proponents welcome the report's recognition of chimpanzees' unique ethical status as humans' closest animal relatives. "I am glad that, finally, some consideration is being given to this problem," says Jane Goodall, the famed British ethologist. Neuroscientist Thomas Insel, director of Emory University's Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center in Atlanta, agrees: "These are not rodents. We've got to make sure these animals are well taken care of over the long term." Insel and other scientists worry, however, that ChiMP could transform research centers such as Yerkes into mere warehouses. And some animal protectionists fear that the proposed federal takeover could actually increase the number of investigators using chimpanzees.

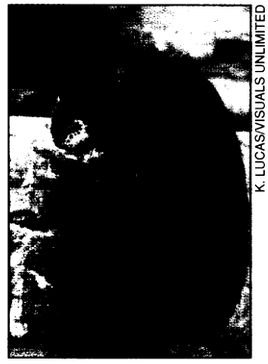
A chimpanzee baby boom launched by NIH in 1986 to provide animals for the study of AIDS created the current overcrowding. But only a single chimp among some 200 infected with HIV has succumbed to AIDS, making the species such a poor model for the disease that fewer than 20 are now needed each year. The resulting high unemployment rate among chimps bred for AIDS research but never infected translates into a "financial hemorrhage" for the colonies, says Insel. "Our colony of 200 chimpanzees costs about $1 million a year to maintain, and we get less than half that back from sponsored research," he says.

The panel confirmed that the colonies are "heading for a crisis unless something is done," says chair Dani Bolognesi, a virologist at Duke University. As a first step toward preventing that crisis, the panel—created 2 years ago at the request of NIH director Harold Varmus—said the current informal moratorium on chimpanzee breeding should be extended for at least five more years.

NIH-SUPPORTED CHIMPANZEE COLONIES

Institution	Colony Location	# of Chimps
M. D. Anderson Cancer Center	Bastrop, TX	150
Primate Foundation of Arizona	Mesa, AZ	80
Yerkes Regional Primate Res. Ctr.	Atlanta, GA	200
U. of Southwestern Louisiana	New Iberia, LA	300
The Coulston Foundation	Holloman AFB, NM	325

SOURCE: NCRR/NIH



K. LUCAS/VISUALS UNLIMITED

Aging apes. Federal panel urges lifetime aid.

After extensive debate, a majority of the panel members concluded that reducing overcrowding through euthanasia was not an option. Chimpanzees "are not equivalent to humans, but they are different from other laboratory animals," says panel member Peter Theran, director of the Center for Laboratory Animal Welfare in Boston. "Euthanasia just because you are finished with them is not appropriate."

A better alternative, the panel decided, would be to transfer ownership of the approximately 1000 chimpanzees at the five major colonies to the government, which would support them throughout their 30- to 50-year lifespans. The cost shouldn't amount to much more than the $7.3 million NIH currently spends each year to support the colonies, the panel said, and other agencies that use chimps in research—the Department of Defense, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—should be asked to chip in. If it can be achieved, such stable, long-term funding for the colonies would be a godsend, says veterinarian Michale Keeling, principal investigator at a 150-chimp colony maintained by the University of Texas's M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

Leaders of animal-welfare groups are worried, though, because the report predicts that dedicated government support for chimpanzees could eliminate the fees of up to $66,000 that colonies charge to conduct research on a chimp. If researchers didn't have to ask granting agencies for funds to cover these fees, they might use chimpanzees far more often. "Government support for the chimpanzees in a permanent retirement situation would be fantastic," says Eric Kleiman, research director for In Defense of Animals, a California-based group that plans to build a sanctuary for about 140 U.S. Air Force chimps. "But if they are looking to substantially increase the use of chimpanzees in research, we totally oppose that."

There are also questions about where the animals would be kept, because not all centers are eager to become retirement communities for the chimps. "We are a scientific program, and my interest would not be in warehousing animals," says Yerkes's Insel. "The worst thing that could happen would be if NIH ... decides that the primate centers should take all of this on." Alternatively, surplus chimps could be sent to private sanctuaries or to new national sanctuaries, the panel suggested.

Louis Sibal, director of the NIH's Office of Laboratory Animal Research, says no decisions have been made about what to do with the animals. "People here at NIH are pleased with the report. ... Now we've got to powwow to see how [the recommendations] can be implemented."

–Wade Roush