



Budget breaker. Space station costs have emptied NASA's purse.

White House to Ease NASA Money Crunch

While most R&D agencies are looking forward to a healthy boost in President Bill Clinton's 1999 budget request, NASA is an exception. Struggling with space station cost overruns and waning White House interest, the agency faced a potential \$1 billion cut 2 months ago. Now, however, things aren't looking so grim. Administration officials say the White House will ask for about \$13.4 billion for NASA in 1999—just \$200 million below the current level.

White House officials hope this brighter funding picture will please NASA boosters in Congress, who have been contesting the move to chop the agency's budget. The officials also hope the higher-than-expected request will grease the wheels for congressional approval of a \$200 million transfer in 1998 NASA funding from other parts of the agency to cover ballooning costs in the station program. House and Senate lawmakers rejected an informal transfer request last fall, arguing

that it would amount to a raid on the science account.

Now the Administration is prepared to ask for the authority as part of its 1999 request, which is due for release 2 February. NASA officials insist they can find the money without hurting science programs such as the Mars missions. But Congress may be a hard sell. "We don't want to give them a blank check," says one staffer. "We still probably will want to set some conditions."

Lawmakers, however, are likely to accept a NASA operations plan released on 13 January that draws on space shuttle and other overhead accounts in 1998 to help plug the gap in funding the space station.

Biochip-Makers Do Battle in Court

A donnybrook over patent rights is breaking out among firms marketing electronic "chips" that recognize DNA sequences. The company least bruised could emerge years from now as top dog in the potentially lucrative biochip business.



Affymetrix Inc. of Santa Clara, California, maker of the patented DNA sensor known as GeneChip, was the most recent to enter the brawl, filing suit on 6 January against two others—Incyte Pharmaceuticals Inc. and Synteni Inc., both of Palo Alto, California. Affymetrix had been on good terms with Incyte, a company

that specializes in creating genetic databases for pharmaceutical R&D. Staffers at Incyte and Affymetrix have been collaborating on a system to monitor gene expression. Although this work continues, relations were strained on 23 December, when Incyte acquired Synteni, a small company with its own patents on DNA sensors.

Affymetrix spokesperson Anne Bowdidge says that by acquiring Synteni, Incyte is "coming awfully close to our core business." Affymetrix's lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court in Wilmington, Delaware, charges that Incyte and Synteni are infringing a key patent that describes the GeneChip concept—an array using 1000 or more DNA sequences on a 1-square-centimeter sensor.

In response, Incyte CEO Roy Whitfield says he is "puzzled" by the suit, "given our ongoing relationship with Affymetrix." Whitfield claims that Synteni's technology is protected by its patents and that the lawsuit "has no merit."

Affymetrix, meanwhile, is defending itself on another flank from an assault by Hyseq Inc. of Sunnyvale, California. This biochip-maker has filed two suits in federal court in Northern California—the first last March and the second in December—claiming that Affymetrix is infringing its patents on DNA hybridization methods.

Next, the Decade of Behavior?

Neuroscientists scored a public relations coup when then-President Bush signed a proclamation declaring the 1990s the Decade of the Brain. Now, as this most cerebral of decades draws to a close, behavioral scientists are trying the same tactic to advance their cause. Next month, the American Psychological Association (APA) plans to announce a proposal that 2000–10 be dubbed the Decade of Behavior.

The idea has met with skepticism among some who see it as PR fluff; one behavioral research lobbyist calls it "a stupid idea," because it's "not where money is." But advocates have found at least one sympathetic official—Alan Leshner, the director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Bethesda, Maryland, who helped launch the brain decade, which brought increased visibility for neuroscience and a temporary uptick in funding. Leshner says he's "enthusiastic." The goal "is not just to raise money," Leshner says, but to do something to "raise understanding of the accomplishments and usefulness of behavioral science."

Indeed, adds Richard McCarty, head of APA's science directorate and leader of its decade drive, the program would bring much-needed visibility to an underappreciated field. Behavior, he argues, "is the missing link between the fundamental molecular elements, neural apparatus, and the whole person."

APA hopes to enlist a broad coalition to push for the proposal. Already the idea has been endorsed by the American Federation of Cognitive and Psychological Sciences, and APA is now trying to bring aboard the Coalition for Social Science Associations. Down the road, McCarty says, he hopes to enlist Administration and congressional support. So far, the idea faces no competition from other would-be claimants of the decade.

Microbiologist Colwell to Become NSF Deputy

Science policy wonks are applauding last week's nomination of microbiologist Rita Colwell to be deputy director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). They also hail the end of an 18-month wait to fill the job.

"I'm delighted because of her broad experience and knowledge of the issues facing NSF," says her predecessor, Anne Petersen, who in July 1996 became a senior official at the W. F. Kellogg Foundation in Michigan. "And I'm especially delighted that they finally nominated someone."

Colwell, 63, former president of the AAAS (which publishes *Science*), will serve as NSF's chief financial



and operating officer under director Neal Lane, overseeing such issues as merit review, affirmative action, and compliance with a federal push to measure what the public is getting for its tax dollars—a particularly tough job for research agencies. Colwell plans to resign as president of the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute upon confirmation by the Senate—no opposition is expected—but will only take a leave of absence from her faculty position there. With

Lane's 6-year term expiring in fall 1999, some observers are speculating that Colwell could also see duty as acting NSF director.