SCIENCE FUNDING

Community Divides Over Push for Bigger Budget

A plan to double federal civilian research spending over a decade is surprisingly contentious because it could cramp biomedicine's push for even faster growth

The idea of doubling federal spending on civilian research might seem irresistible to cash-hungry scientists. But a plan to do just that, scheduled to go before the U.S. Senate next month, has been greeted with indifference by some biomedical lobbyists and university officials, and outright opposition from the chair of the House science committee. The split illuminates how, when it comes to lobbying for science, the pressures of the federal budget process can drive political wedges between traditional allies in the scientific community.

Face time. Several scientific societies honored Representative George Brown (center left) and Senator Joe Lieberman (center right) for supporting research funding during a lobbying campaign last month in Washington.

The doubling measure,* proposed by Senators Bill Frist (R–TN) and Jay Rockefeller (D–WV), is aimed at increasing the budgets of 14 nonbiomedical research agencies, from NASA to the Smithsonian, from $34 billion last year to $68 billion by 2010. That's a slightly longer doubling timetable than a 5-year plan that biomedical science supporters are pushing for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Last year, for instance, biomedical groups helped that agency win a 15%, $2 billion increase, on the way to what they hope will be a $27.3 billion NIH budget by 2003.

Washington lobbyists who have organized an active "doubling group" to promote Frist-Rockefeller say the bill's simple message has provided an important rallying point for the nonbiomedical science community and helped convince researchers around the country to become politically active. But critics say its status as an authorization bill is a serious flaw. Although authorizing bills can suggest how the government should use funds, only the 13 annual appropriating bills actually give agencies the OK to spend the money. "This is not a bill that pays the bills," says one observer, who like many in the scientific community was unwilling to speak on the record for this story. He fears the effort could divert attention from more important spending battles, noting that "no postdoc was ever hired on an authorization."

* S.296, "The Federal Research Investment Act" (thomas.loc.gov).

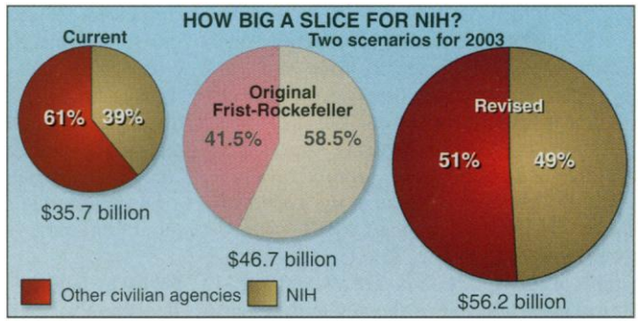
Such tensions first surfaced in earnest last year, when Frist, Rockefeller, and other sponsors began talking up a modified version of doubling measures introduced in the past. Although physicists, materials scientists, and others lobbied successfully for it in the Senate (the House never voted on the bill), support from the university and biomedical communities was lukewarm at best.

That trend continued into this year, when the bill was reintroduced in the Senate. The presidents of several prominent research institutions endorsed the measure, with Chuck Vest of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge calling it a needed step. But many others have chosen to invest their political capital in efforts that promise a quicker payoff, such as more government scholarships, support for teaching hospitals, or a new building. Observers say such choices are understandable. University officials "get advisories from their Washington representatives saying, 'Save your ammunition for things that matter,' " says lobbyist Mike Lubell of the American Physical Society, a leader of the doubling push. In addition, some university presidents are reluctant to fuel campus tensions by backing the sciences in the absence of a similar doubling effort for the humanities. Still, academia's uneven support has been publicly bemoaned by Rockefeller, a former college president himself, who warns administrators against being too shortsighted.

A bigger problem for the bill has been the biomedical community's ambivalence. Although the leaders of some biomedical-lobbying heavyweights—such as the 60,000-member Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB)—have spoken out strongly for spending more on nonbiomedical science, they have yet to exercise their substantial lobbying muscle in any real way on behalf of Frist-Rockefeller. The reason, say insiders, is that lobbyists worry that endorsing the bill's call for an 11-year doubling could undermine their own effort to double NIH's budget in just 5 years. Embracing both timetables "would confuse the message—an absolute lobbying no-no," says a congressional aide.

In a bid to win over the biomedical community, Frist-Rockefeller supporters earlier this month added a complex provision that allows NIH to grow at its own pace (see graph). Supporters figure that they will need all the help they can get in the House, where they face serious opposition from Science Committee chair James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), who has called the measure "a feel-good" effort that would undermine the panel's credibility with appropriators. Sensenbrenner's distaste has prompted backers to consider ways of sidestepping his committee, which normally would take up the measure. One option is to begin with the powerful Commerce Committee, headed by the friendlier Representative Thomas Bliley (R–VA), in an effort to generate a political groundswell. But some Capitol Hill veterans caution that an end run could backfire. "If there is one fellow I wouldn't want to [tee] off, it's Sensenbrenner," says one.

Such criticism, however, hasn't fazed doubling proponents, who are hoping for an overwhelming victory next month in the Senate. "You have to start someplace," says Kathleen Kingscott, head of the Washington-based Coalition for Technology Partnerships. She and other proponents argue that autho-



Double vision. Recent changes in a proposal to double civilian R&D spending over 11 years would slow the growing share of the federal pie going to NIH's budget, which biomedical lobbyists hope to double by 2003.

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) MOFFAT/FEDERATION OF MATERIALS SCIENTISTS; SOURCE: AAAS, FASEB, S.296

rizing bills can be used to convince appropriators to put money behind an idea. "They help put you in a stronger negotiating position," says Kevin Casey, government relations head at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Frist-Rockefeller also "has become a very important organizing tool" for the community, Kingscott says. It wasn't too many years ago, she notes, that the group's biweekly strategy sessions drew fewer than a dozen science politicos. "Now it's become hard to find a room large enough to hold us," says Betsy Houston of the Washington-based Federation of Materials Scientists, about meetings that regularly draw 30 or more people. The meetings have also become a staging ground for other campaigns, such as the ongoing effort to fight off proposed rules that would require scientists to turn over raw data to anyone who makes a Freedom of Information Act request (*Science*, 12 February, p. 914). Indeed, participants are making plans to continue meeting even after their work on Frist-Rockefeller is done.

Similarly, an annual science lobbying blitz sponsored by the doubling partners has proven to be increasingly popular. Late last month, for instance, more than 200 researchers from academia and industry—many of them political neophytes—came to Washington to urge lawmakers to support more federally funded research, including passage of Frist-Rockefeller. The staff meetings and briefings were "an eye-opener" for researchers who had no idea how to approach lawmakers with their concerns, says geologist Gail Ashley of Rutgers University in Brunswick, New Jersey, who represented the 16,000-member Geological Society of America.

The show of force demonstrated that "science and technology has an active political constituency," says Kingscott. The event, now in its fourth year, has also had an effect on congressional staff, who actually write most legislation, says another lobbyist. "Two years ago, if you mentioned R&D, you could just see the eyes glaze over," he says. "Not anymore. Now they are interested."

Whether friend or foe of Frist-Rockefeller, science lobbyists are hoping that interest in the bill will carry over to what promises to be an especially nasty fight over federal spending. Last week, House and Senate appropriating committees received sobering news about their allocations for the 2000 budget that begins on 1 October. Confirming a long-rumored strategy, Republican leaders gave the smaller committees—such as the one covering the Post Office—enough funds to get their work done quickly while leaving several major spending committees, including the one handling NIH, some $8 billion to $10 billion short of what the Administration has requested.

Although the allocations were made ostensibly to satisfy mandated budget caps, few observers expect the committees to impose such cuts. Instead, they say the allocations are designed to cause a budgetary "train wreck" that will force the White House and Congress to jointly take the politically unpopular step of removing the spending caps and dipping into a mounting budget surplus. A similar scenario last year produced NIH's mammoth windfall, and some science lobbyists are hoping that history will be repeated. This time, however, whether or not Frist-Rockefeller becomes law, nonbiomedical scientists are planning to be reading from the same page as their biomedical allies as they lobby for more federal research dollars. **–DAVID MALAKOFF**

TRADE POLICY

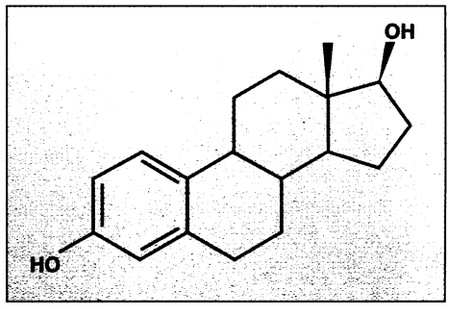
Scientific Cross-Claims Fly In Continuing Beef War

The European Union cites what it claims are new safety concerns in its long-running battle with the United States over hormone-treated beef

"In time of war, the first casualty is truth," declared American radio commentator Boake Carter back in the 1930s. In the ongoing trade war between the European Union (EU) and the United States over the safety of dosing cattle with sex hormones to make them grow faster and leaner, scientific truth may not be a casualty, but it is at least a rapidly moving target. The latest salvo comes from the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, which late last month issued a 139-page report raising what it claims are new concerns about the safety of hormone residues in beef.

Based on the work of a nine-member panel of European and U.S.-based endocrinologists, toxicologists, and other scientists, the report argues, among other things, that the residues might have cancer-causing potential. It also suggests that young children might be more sensitive to low levels of the hormones than previously thought, especially to their effects on growth and sexual development. These conclusions are themselves coming under fire, however. "The EU report is alarmist, uncritical, and selective" in its marshaling of evidence, says Melvin Grumbach, a pediatric endocrinologist at the University of California, San Francisco.

The trans-Atlantic dispute began in 1989 when the EU banned all imports of hormone-treated beef. American farmers regard the growth-promoting hormones as essential for keeping their industry profitable, and U.S. officials insist that the practice poses no health concerns for the consumer. But to the EU, even small amounts of hormone residues in beef, liver, and other food organs represent an unacceptable health risk—hence the ban.



Controversial compound. Europe is afraid estradiol residues in beef will harm consumers.

The United States and Canada filed a complaint in 1996 with the Geneva-based World Trade Organization (WTO). They contended that the EU ban is based more on a desire to protect European farmers from American imports than on scientifically valid evidence of health risks. The WTO ruled against the ban in 1997, and a WTO appeal body upheld that ruling in January 1998, asserting that although some theoretical health concerns might exist, the EU had not proven its case.

The U.S. position was further bolstered in February of this year by a report from a different group, the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA), organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). JECFA, which includes scientists from Europe and Australia as well as from the United States, reviewed the evidence for some of the hormones used in cattle and concluded that the levels of residues normally found in beef are safe.

So far, however, the EU, braced by its latest report, is hanging tough. Earlier this month, the deadline for compliance with the WTO ruling came and went. As a result, the United States and Canada are now drawing up plans to retaliate by slapping stiff tariffs