

Spending Bills Show No Sign of Surplus—Yet

The U.S. Treasury may be awash in excess revenue—an estimated \$228 billion next year and \$4.2 trillion over the coming decade—but this year many science programs are feeling parched. At the midpoint of the annual budget cycle, health and defense agencies appear headed for large increases, while the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Department of Energy (DOE), NASA, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) are facing a fiscal drought compared to their requests (*Science*, 11 February, p. 952).

A lot could change before the 2001 fiscal year begins in October, however. Although the House has passed most of its spending bills, the Senate has yet to weigh in on many of them. In addition, tight caps on domestic spending, which are keeping many appropriations figures artificially low, could, thanks to the booming economy, be eased before legislators head home to campaign for the November elections. Finally, President Clinton has already threatened to veto spending bills that don't provide sufficient funds for the Administration's priority programs. The result is a confusing and wildly varied budget picture for science and technology agencies.

The Administration, which requested big increases for many science agencies, says that science remains on its short list of priorities. "In the current economic climate, we have an obligation to invest in science," declared Jacob Lew, director of the Office of Management and Budget, last week. "So we're going to stick to our guns for as long as it takes to get the job done right."

Republican congressional leaders, meanwhile, defend the spending bills as fiscally responsible, but they are surprisingly candid about the constraints they have faced. "[Although] NSF has fared comparatively well in the appropriations process, I would have preferred to see an increase in funding closer to the level requested," admitted Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), chair of the House Science Committee, last month when the House approved a 4.3% increase in NSF's budget rather than the 17.3% requested.

Budget highlights to date include:

NIH: Biomedical research advocates are edging closer to their goal of doubling the National Institutes of Health's budget by 2003. Last week the Senate approved a bill that would give NIH a \$2.7 billion increase, to \$20.5 billion. A House version passed on

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14 June provides a \$1 billion raise, which matches the Administration's request. Representative John Porter (R-IL), who heads the House spending panel that funds NIH, told colleagues voting on a 6% boost that he expects the final NIH tally to be closer to the Senate's figure.

NSF: The \$167 million increase the House approved would raise NSF's budget to \$4.06 billion, far short of the \$4.57 billion request. It blocks the agency from starting the \$17 million EarthScope monitoring project and the \$12 million National Ecological Observatory Network, while approving \$12.5 million to continue work on HIAPER, a new high-altitude research plane that ranks lower among NSF's priorities. The \$696 million education directorate would actually shrink by \$2 million, with a \$12 million Administration initiative to train information technology workers biting the dust. But the graduate teaching fellows program, a favorite of Director Rita Colwell, would rise by \$10 million to \$19 million.

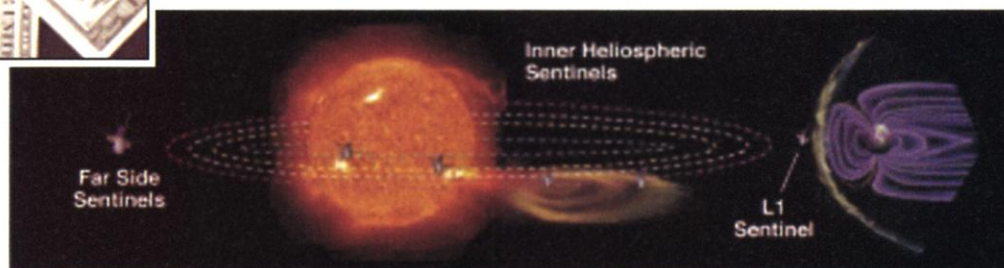
NASA: The space agency's hopes for a new mission to study the sun were dimmed by the House, which rejected the \$20 million NASA wanted for its Living With a Star program. Lawmakers worried that the annual costs for the effort, which would

move ahead. Legislators rejected some \$30 million in upgrades to heavily used accelerators, synchrotrons, and research reactors and all \$36 million of DOE's share of the multiagency Nanoscale Science Initiative. But there is optimism that the Senate will restore the funds. "The wrinkles will iron out in DOE's favor," predicts a House aide.

Defense: Last month the Senate approved a 10.5% increase, to \$1.3 billion, for the Defense Department's basic research account, more than doubling the Administration's requested 5% boost. The House is poised to follow suit with an 11.5% increase.

NIST: The House last week approved essentially steady-state funding for the agency's core chemistry, physics, and materials science labs but nixed plans for funding several new initiatives, including \$50 million for a cybersecurity effort and NIST's \$10 million chunk of the nanoscale initiative. It again killed the controversial Advanced Technology Program (ATP), an effort to share with industry the cost of high-risk applied research. A perennial target of Republicans since 1995, ATP rose swiftly from the dead last year and wound up with nearly \$200 million. Supporters are again hoping for a rescue from the Senate.

Other agencies: The Environmental Protection Agency's science and technology account got a \$5 million boost from the House, to \$650 million, although it falls \$24 million



Inhospitable climate. NASA's Living With a Star effort to study the sun was one of several research programs cut by House appropriators.

place a series of sophisticated spacecraft around the sun to examine solar storms and the solar wind, would balloon to \$177 million by 2005. Overall, the president's request for an additional \$400 million was whittled down to a paltry \$58 million. The House also criticized the agency for shortchanging programs to analyze space data and ignoring outside advice to do so, and ordered up a study to examine the problem.

Energy: Last week the House approved a \$17.3 billion budget that is 4%, or \$686 million, over this year's spending level but some \$853 million below its request. A \$262 million bid for the Spallation Neutron Source, a \$1.4 billion materials science facility under construction at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, was slashed to \$100 million, which agency officials say is too low to

short of the president's request. Within the Agriculture Department, the House and Senate disagreed on two competitive grants programs, the Senate adding \$2 million to the \$119 million National Research Initiative and the House cutting it to \$97 million and barring funding for the \$120 million Initiative for Future Agriculture Systems. Last week's House vote would set the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's overall funding \$100 million below this year's \$2.3 billion level and nearly \$530 million below the president's request. At the same time, it removed language tying funding for global climate change research to Senate passage of the Kyoto Global Climate Change treaty, currently a dim prospect.

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