



## 2001 SPENDING

# NIH Gets \$2.5 Billion More as Congress Wraps Up Budget

In the end, the wine proved stronger than the whining. Last week, the U.S. Congress approved a 14.2% increase for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), to a record \$20.3 billion, keeping the agency on track to double its budget by 2003. The 15 December vote essentially upheld a funding deal that lawmakers had sealed on 29 October with a red wine toast, overcoming last-minute opposition from fiscal conservatives who sought to freeze budgets at existing levels.

NIH's raise was part of a \$450 billion spending package that rolled together the last three of the 13 annual appropriations bills that make up the federal government's \$1.8 trillion budget for the 2001 fiscal year, which began 1 October. Disagreements over education, workplace safety, and immigration issues had pushed the final agreement beyond election day, forcing Congress to pass a near-record 20 temporary funding bills to sustain operations. Its 15 December adjournment ended the longest congressional session since 1982.

The last few weeks were especially torturous for many biomedical research advocates, who feared that lawmakers might scrap a pact—dubbed “the Merlot agreement” after the bottle of wine opened to seal the deal—to increase NIH's budget by 15%, to \$20.5 billion. That amount topped the Administration's request by \$1.7 billion. House majority leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) led the charge, announcing that House conservatives would oppose the final bills unless the total amount they contained was significantly reduced. He suggested a freeze at existing levels pending a new budget from President-elect George W. Bush.

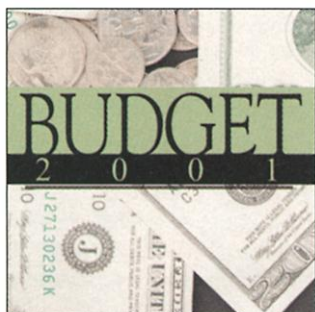
Several dozen research advocacy groups—ranging from the American Association of Immunologists to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation—railed against that proposal at a rally last week in an ornate U.S. Capitol hall. A freeze “would be a terrible mistake that

would cut [funds for] 4500 research projects,” Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) told the crowd of several hundred budget watchers. He urged them “to make sure members of Congress understand that the threat to important research is real.”

In the end, budget negotiators agreed to sustain NIH's increase at near-Merlot levels. “It's a wonderful outcome ... when you think of everything we've been worried about over the last several weeks,” says Mary Hendrix, president of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, one of the leaders of the effort to double NIH's budget.

The double-digit increase is the agency's third in a row, notes Hendrix, a biomedical researcher at the University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City.

All of NIH's 24 institutes will share in the wealth, which will allow the agency to restore any grant funds withheld earlier this month due to budget uncertainty (*Science*, 24 November, p. 1477). The budget of the National Cancer Institute, NIH's largest, will grow 13.5% to \$3.76 billion, while the Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute retains second



**Biomedical boosters.** Senator Tom Harkin (left), former House Republican leader Bob Michel (middle), and former House health committee chair Paul Rogers (right) rallied NIH supporters last week in Washington.

place with an identical boost, to \$2.3 billion. The fledgling institute on complementary and alternative medicine will grow the fastest, with a 29.3% boost to \$89 million, while a center on minority health and health disparities will start life with \$130 million. The future of another new institute, however, is hazy. NIH officials earlier opposed a proposal for an institute on bioimaging and bioengineering, saying it was unnecessary (*Science*, 22 September, p. 2015). But it passed, anyway, with help from Senate leader Trent Lott (R-MS), although budgetmakers rebuffed a bid to fund it this year. Should President Clinton sign the authorization bill, NIH officials will have to choose between, in the words of one lobbyist, “what they want to do and what they think they are required to do.”

NIH's gain, however, came at a slight cost to other science programs. As part of the final agreement, conservatives convinced budgetmakers to slightly reduce overall spending by trimming about \$1 billion from 2001 domestic and defense budgets previously approved. The 0.22% cut means that the National Science Foundation, for example, will lose a tiny \$9 million of its \$4.4 billion slice of the pie. Officials at the affected agencies say they may not know for months how they will apportion the cuts.

In the meantime, science spending advocates are already plotting to repeat this year's success, which saw total federal R&D spending exceed \$90 billion and included substantial increases for NIH, the National Science Foundation, and science programs at the Department of Energy. NIH supporters are overjoyed that three key figures in future budget-

making—Bush and the heads of both the House and Senate appropriations committees—are already on record as supporting the doubling goal. And a growing bipartisan consensus about the value of basic research could bode well for science budgets in a Congress divided along partisan lines and looking for areas of agreement. “Science,” says one aide to a House Republican, “could be a big beneficiary of the pressure for bipartisanship.”

—DAVID MALAKOFF

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