

Hard Times for Big Science

Tight budgetary times have caught up with Big Science. Last week, two congressional subcommittees voted to cancel NASA's controversial \$30-billion space station and to trim \$100 million from a planned \$262-million increase in the budget for the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC)—moves that portend a serious floor debate over the space station and construction delays (accompanied by cost increases) for the SSC.

Congressional aides say they expect the full House Appropriations Committee to vote to cancel the station as well, leaving a floor debate as the only opening for station defenders to reverse the decision in the House. While passions are running high—Vice President Dan Quayle, for instance, immediately accused House Democrats of “undermining the legacy of President John Kennedy”—station supporters face an uphill battle to restore NASA's \$1.9-billion request for the project. Thanks to last year's budget agreement, which imposed strict limits on domestic spending and turned the appropriations process into a zero-sum game, cuts of this magnitude take on a momentum that makes them difficult to turn around, staffers say.

The space station is part of the same bill that funds the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Environmental Protection Agency, and veterans' and housing programs—all of which reportedly received large chunks of the money originally intended for the station. (NSF, for instance, received its full budget request—an unheard-of event in the House.) Since each of these programs has its own constituency, attempts to shift money back out of these accounts to the space station are likely to encounter fierce resistance. “These other people have a promise now, and they're closing their hands around it,” says Robert Reischauer, director of the Congressional Budget Office.

If the station's defenders can prevail in a floor debate, however, the appropriations subcommittee could be forced to undo its own handiwork. Working to that end are a diverse collection of legislators, many of whom are upset because the full House voted overwhelmingly to authorize the space station just 3 weeks ago. Representative George Brown (D-CA), chairman of the House science and space committee, announced last week that he opposes the cancellation, and is planning to meet with Republican members and the Administration to map out a rescue strategy.

Despite these preparations, some station defenders suspect that the Administration

won't choose to fight the decision in the House at all. “I think the Administration hopes it can get Senate approval and then work things out in [a House-Senate] conference,” says Representative Robert Walker (R-PA). Reischauer, however, says that the Senate appropriations subcommittee is likely to have even fewer dollars to distribute and “an equally hard time with [the station].”

NASA officials, who say they are “driving straight ahead” with station development until Congress settles the matter one way or another, have apparently decided to press a public relations offensive designed to play up the station's strengths. At a press briefing earlier this week, associate administrator for space flight William Lenoir emphasized the station's contribution to U.S. “space tech-

nology and operations leadership,” the competitiveness of the aerospace industry, education, space science, and “aerospace jobs.” Lenoir says he is cautiously hopeful that the station will survive: “The consequences of not having one are so severe that [cancellation] doesn't make sense.”

Compared to this uproar, reaction to cuts in the Department of Energy's high-energy physics program was muted. In addition to slowing the growth of the SSC budget, the energy appropriations subcommittee voted to delay for at least 1 year and possibly longer the installation of a new injector at Fermilab's Tevatron accelerator—an upgrade physicists say is necessary to keep Fermilab in the race to find the top quark.

To Reischauer, the blood and thunder of these appropriations votes suggests only that the budget process is working smoothly: “These are not the last such decisions we'll see.” ■ DAVID P. HAMILTON

OMB Tries on a New Cap

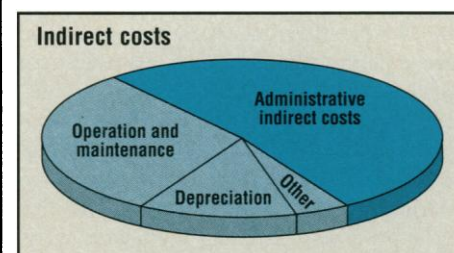
The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has made it clear that universities, perhaps as early as this fall, will face severe limits on the overhead they can add on to federal research grants. OMB last week proposed to cap the amount that any university can claim for administration—currently about half of all indirect costs—at 26% of the modified direct costs of a research grant. That's slightly below the national average for all universities. The National Institutes of Health has estimated that the cap would shave \$50 million to \$60 million per year from the total amount it pays for indirect costs—enough to fund some 250 additional grants a year.

The proposed cap is the second concrete step OMB has taken since indirect costs became a political *cause célèbre*. Last month, it announced that it would limit the kinds of charges that the government will accept as legitimately related to research (*Science*, 3 May, p. 636). In addition to the cap, OMB said last week it will tighten rules on facilities reimbursement so that only buildings and equipment directly associated with federally sponsored research can be charged as indirect costs on grants. Universities will also be required to prove that they are not using federal dollars to underwrite the cost of research sponsored by organizations that pay little or no indirect costs, such as foreign governments or industry.

For the future, OMB has established a task force to perform a thorough review of its indirect cost reimbursement strategies. The agency has also started a process to

standardize the accounting procedures universities use to bill the government. Because universities compute their costs differently, it has been difficult to compare cost rates from one university to another.

OMB's cap is the same as one proposed in legislation written by William E. Dannemeyer (R-CA) and Henry A. Waxman (D-CA). Rick Boucher (D-VA), the chairman of the House science committee, who had proposed a flat rate of 45% for all indirect



A hefty bite. Administrative costs represent about half of the 50.99% average indirect cost rate for universities.

costs except facilities, is now leaning toward joining the Dannemeyer/Waxman cap proposal. OMB's move may, however, have slowed any momentum for Congressional action. If so, that would be fine with Representative John D. Dingell (D-MI), whose investigation of Stanford University's accounting abuses sparked the furor over indirect costs. Dingell has said he's not through investigating university practices and believes it is too soon to start proposing fixes until the size of the problem is more clearly determined. ■ JOSEPH PALCA