Congress Accepts Better Idea Generated by Scientists and Raises Basic Research Budgets for Fiscal 1998

Only two months after President Clinton hailed the entente cordiale in Congress to balance the Federal budget, his Administration and the Republican controlled Congress were battling again on a wide range of issues—from campaign finance reform to antiabortion, immigration and education legislation. But at least one topic has had surprisingly large bipartisan appeal in the 105th Congress—funding of science research.

House and Senate conferees agreed to increase the fiscal 1998 budget of the National Science Foundation (NSF) by almost 5% above the 1997 level and more than $62 million more than the Administration's request. The 1998 appropriation for NSF is at least 2% higher than inflation. Congress handed NASA $13.65 billion, which is $100 million above the request and a tad below the 1997 level. The space agency's science, aeronautics and technology programs reaped $48 million more than the request and $237 million above 1997.

The Department of Energy (DOE) not only got what it asked for, it even got more than the request for a few accounts, such as an extra $5 million each for high-energy physics and nuclear physics, as well as 28.3% more for solar and renewable energy prorams. The magnetic fusion program, which has been shortchanged by the Administration and Congress in recent years, received $7 million more than the requested $225 million. And, while DOE's biological and environmental research wound up with a hefty 28% boost over the 1997 level, nearly $25 million has been directed into pork-barrel projects by well-connected members of Congress. Basic energy sciences received 2.8% above its 1997 appropriation. The increase was due to two pork items amounting to about $18 million left unspent by the prospective recipients but also stamped "hands off" for any other use by the program. When the pork funds were subtracted from the program's funds, $649.7 million was left—though the Office of Management and Budget allowed basic energy sciences to use the appropriation of $668.2 million, which included the pork items, as the base for the Administration's request in 1998.

The allocations for most of the science agencies were welcomed by veterans in Congress, such as Representative George E. Brown Jr, the California Democrat who once headed the House science committee. During the 8 October floor debate on the bill for VA/HUD and independent agencies, which includes NSF and NASA, Brown declared: "I do not want to be overly enthusiastic, but in the roughly 32 years that I have [been in the House] I think from the standpoint of the Committee on Science we have probably reached some sort of a peak of efficiency and effectiveness and concern and sharing. . . I think the important message is that the [appropriations conference committee] in this bill has done more for research and development than the Administration has asked for." He was critical of the Administration for "shortchanging" some important R&D investments, but, he said, "[but with this budget] we are now on the right track."

While John Gibbons, President Clinton's science adviser, was generally pleased with the budgets for the science agencies, he expressed concern for the defense research enterprise, where basic research fell from 1997 levels for the Navy, Air Force and defense-wide accounts. Indeed, DOD basic research declined for the fifth straight year.

The success of the R&D appropriations owes much to scientists themselves. The coalition of more than 40 scientific and engineering societies that issued a call to arms last March and urged Congress to raise the research budget by 7% (PHYSICS TODAY, April, page 53) left an impact on Congress. "Their unified message did not go unnoticed," said Congressman Brown. "We had been asking them to do something like that for years. It was an idea whose time had come." On 22 October, more than 90 professional groups, gathered at the Capitol and called on Congress and the Administration "to double the current level of Federal investment in research within the next 10 years, starting with fiscal 1999."

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Bottom Lines: Physics-Related R&D Budgets for Fiscal 1998

	FY 97 actual	FY 98 request	FY 98 enacted	Percentage gain (loss) 1997–1998
	(millions of dollars)			
National Science Foundation				
Research and related activities	2432.0	2514.7	2545.7	4.7
Major research equipment	80.0	85.0	109.0	36.3
Education and human resources	619.0	625.5	632.5	2.2
Salaries, expenses and inspector general's office	139.0	141.8	141.8	2.0
Total NSF	3270.0	3367.0	3429.0	4.9
Department of Energy				
Basic energy sciences	649.7*	668.2	668.2	2.8
Materials sciences, including solid-state physics	332.1	392.5	392.5	18.2
Chemical sciences, including atomic physics	171.9	199.9	199.9	16.3
Engineering and geosciences	41.4	41.4	41.4	0
Energy biosciences	28.0	27.7	27.7	(1.1)
Construction, combustion research facility	10.0	7.0	7.0	(30.0)
High-energy physics	670.0	675.0	680.0	1.5
Nuclear physics	315.9	315.9	320.9	1.6
Biological and environmental research	382.4	376.7	406.7	6.4
Solar and renewable energy	269.9	344.7	346.3	28.3
Fusion energy sciences	230.4	225.0	232.0	0.7
Weapons activities	4282.2	5078.6	4146.7	(3.2)
Department of Defense				
Army basic research	179.1	198.9	186.5	4.1
Navy basic research	352.1	382.1	349.1	(0.9)
Air Force basic research	210.8	226.8	207.2	(1.7)
Defense-wide basic research	337.8	355.9	337.3	(0.2)
Total basic research	1075.0	1163.7	1062.0	(1.2)
Total applied research	2860.0	2814.1	3076.0	7.5
National Aeronautics and Space Administration				
Human space flight, including space station	5362.9	5326.5	5506.5	2.7
Science, aeronautics and technology	5453.0	5642.0	5690.0	4.3
Mission support and related expenditures	2562.2	2513.2	2433.2	(5.0)

*Basic energy sciences was deprived of about $18 million of its FY 1997 account by two "pork" items, which weren't spent last year—though the sums were included in the base for the FY 1998 budget request.