

NSF Budget Doubling Stalls, but Increases Likely

When President Bush sent his fiscal year 2003 budget proposal to Capitol Hill last February, House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.) noted the 17% increase proposed for the National Institutes of Health and the 5% offering for NSF and wasn't happy. Describing the NSF funding proposal as "anemic," Boehlert observed that "just the increase in the NIH budget is larger than the research budget of NSF."

Boehlert represented the views of many Democrats and Republicans in Congress. Yet after a summer in which it seemed certain that the NSF budget would be tracked into years of significant budget increases, a last-minute procedural move by one cost-conscious senator stopped everything. Almost everybody, including officials at the administration's Office of Management and Budget (OMB), agrees that NSF should have more money. But with deficits growing and the threat of war looming, the administration doesn't want to commit to doing for NSF what it has done for NIH—doubling its budget over five years.

In classic Washington fashion, it isn't so much the money that is the problem, but the intentions behind the money. Ironically, one of the few people who is on record against the congressional efforts to significantly increase the NSF budget is the agency's director, Rita Colwell. She detailed her opposition in a letter to a Senate subcommittee.

Hearings held

After Boehlert saw the Bush budget, he began a series of hearings that addressed the imbalance in the federal science and technology portfolio. NIH, with its \$26 billion budget, would receive almost \$4 billion more under the Bush proposal. NSF, with its \$4.8 billion budget, would receive a 5% increase of \$240 million, but much of that would come from the transfer of outside programs into the foundation. The increase in new money would be 3.6% (see PHYSICS TODAY, April 2002, page 30).

As Boehlert conducted his hearings, Representative Nick Smith (R-Mich.), chairman of the science committee's research subcommittee, introduced in the House an NSF funding bill called the Investing in America's Future Act.

 A last-minute procedural move stopped a Senate bill that would have doubled NSF's budget in five years.

The bill authorized a 15% increase in the NSF budget for each of the next three years. Although the bill had the stated goal of putting the agency "on a track to double its budget in five years," the legislators authorized only three years of funding.

The bill overwhelmingly passed the Republican-controlled House on 5 June with a 397-to-25 vote. "The expeditious movement of this bill through the House is a testament to the widespread support in Congress," Smith said. Within weeks, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) introduced a similar bill in the Senate, titled the National Science Foundation Doubling Act.

Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.), a cosponsor, said the bill was named the Doubling Act because "Congress's intent is to double NSF's budget by fiscal year 2007." The Senate bill called for an 11.8% increase in NSF funding, less than the 12.8% in the House bill but more than double the administration's proposal.

The Senate bill breezed through both the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. Because the bill had broad support, it was brought to the Senate floor to be approved by a unanimous consent agreement. At that point Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), known as a fiscal watchdog, put a hold on the bill, apparently with the blessing of OMB.

"What happens is, at the end of a session, a bunch of bills are potentially hotlined [moved quickly without apparent opposition]," a White House official said. "We have senators call and ask what we think of the bills. Kyl asked and we provided the letter [from NSF Director Colwell] and he decided to put a hold on the bill."

What triggered Kyl's concern, the official said, was the bill's goal of doubling the NSF budget and the five-year time frame. "The administration doesn't support arbitrary goals, including doubling or tripling of budgets. We want to get away from that and

focus on results." In the past, the official continued, NSF authorization bills have been for three years, not five.

Colwell's letter, written in mid-September to Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space, said NSF opposed the bill in part because "the amounts authorized . . . do not conform to the administration's FY 2003 budget request for NSF." Colwell reiterated her support for the president's 5% NSF increase and noted that Office of Science and Technology Policy Director John Marburger "has stated that any plans for increased expenditures must be supported by a specific rationale for each increase, rather than an arbitrary formula."

No choice

Neal Lane, NSF director for five years under former President Bill Clinton, said, "When I first heard about the letter my assumption was, and still is, that the White House was taking a very hard line about the bottom line in the budget and that the director of NSF had no choice."

Capitol Hill staff members working on the issue note that agency heads are often asked to write such letters to strengthen administration budget officials' hand in fights with Congress. However the process has left Colwell, who was an advocate of greater NSF funding when she was appointed by Clinton in 1998, as an "on the record" opponent of increasing NSF funding. Colwell declined to answer questions from PHYSICS TODAY about her letter.

House and Senate staff members are reshaping the Senate bill to alleviate the administration's concerns. The doubling language has disappeared and the five-year funding plan has been cut to three years. "The OMB is saying they have no real objections to it now," a House staff member said. "There are still some issues, but it's not like we're miles apart."

Sometime in December Congress may pass a funding bill that increases NSF's budget by significantly more than the administration's 5% proposal, but doesn't include the commitment to doubling. "I hope the bill gets done. I don't see any reason now why it won't," the White House official said.

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