

FY 2006 Research Funding: Boost or Bust?

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BARTON REPPERT

Although President George W. Bush's controversial plans to partially privatize Social Security may grab more headlines, a battle is brewing on Capitol Hill over the administration's retreat from its promised support for science budgets.

The Republican chairman and key members of the House Committee on Science from both parties are gearing up to push for augmented funding of research programs that would otherwise be cut, held flat, or granted paltry increases under the Bush administration's proposed budget for next year. However, Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, a moderate Republican from upstate New York, and his colleagues face heavy pressure to constrain spending in a \$2.6 trillion fiscal year budget that's awash with nearly a half-trillion dollars of red ink.

"It's going to be a battle," predicted Boehlert, who has chaired the committee since January 2001. In advocating enhanced funding for science, he must deal not only with fiscal bean-counters at the White House, but also—and more directly—with antideficit budget hawks in the conservative House leadership.

Overall, the administration has proposed spending \$60.819 billion on science and technology in fiscal year (FY) 2006, down by \$877 million—about 1 percent—from the current year's spending. NASA's exploration program would get a hefty 18 percent boost—in line with Bush's announced "vision" of sending astronauts back to the moon by 2020 and eventually to Mars. By contrast, after growing rapidly since the end of the Clinton administration, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) would get a meager 0.7 percent increment. Funding for the Na-

tional Science Foundation (NSF) would increase by 2.4 percent, but support for the agency would still be about 1 percent below its FY 2004 level, because last November, Congress imposed a 3.1 percent cut on NSF spending for FY 2005. Research funds for the Environmental Protection Agency would grow by 2.2 percent, but several other federal research budgets would shrink: by 4.1 percent at the Department of Energy's Office of Science, by 8.4 percent at the NOAA (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration), and by 17.4 percent at USDA's Agricultural Research Service.

In an interview, Boehlert called the administration's tight-fisted approach to research and development "not a wise decision, even in very difficult times.... Our future is largely dependent upon our response to the challenge to invest more in R&D on the part of the government, to encourage more investment on the part of the private sector, and to encourage more partnerships between universities and businesses."

Three years ago, Boehlert and fellow science-minded members of Congress had joined with representatives of the US research community in toasting the passage of legislation that called for doubling the NSF budget over a five-year period, with annual increases of approximately 15 percent or more. It seemed an attainable goal, because Congress and both Presidents Clinton and Bush had delivered on a similar promise for NIH, doubling its budget between 1998 and 2003. But the effort on behalf of NSF foundered within 12 months as bills came due for the war in Iraq, tax cuts, and new spending for homeland security.

Nevertheless, Boehlert and his colleagues on the science panel—including deficit-wary Republicans—are preparing to go to bat for at least somewhat more ample increases in FY 2006 R&D funding, particularly for the NSF. They include Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC), a veteran budget hawk who this year became chairman of the Subcommittee on Research.

Inglis expressed concern at a recent hearing that "without NSF supporting basic research, our edge in science will slip away and an innovation gap will grow.... We've got to stop spending and start investing. Investing in basic and applied science research makes sense. If we invest wisely, we can find economic growth through innovation."

Some Democrats on the science panel are more pointed in their comments about the administration's science and technology blueprint. "When you get into the guts of the budget, there's smoke and mirrors," said Rep. Mark Udall (D-CO), a member of the Subcommittee on Environment, Technology, and Standards.

He added, "The science community is really going to have to be very aggressive in making the case that in the long run this is about homeland security and economic competitiveness, in order to reinstate a lot of these important investments.... The business community is also going to have to play an important role. I know this is a very difficult budget time. But this is one area where we can agree that a slowdown or a reversal would be very detrimental."

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