NIH edges towards healthy increase in research budget

Washington. Congressional negotiators reportedly agreed late last week to grant the National Institutes of Health (NIH) a 6.9 per cent increase in funding in the 1997 fiscal year, which begins on 1 October.

The \$819-million increase, which would result in a total NIH budget of \$12.7 billion next year, was being negotiated as part of a broad spending bill covering those parts of the US government for which individual spending laws have not been enacted.

Congress was expected to vote on the omnibus spending bill as soon as Tuesday or Wednesday of this week. Legislators are keen to adjourn so that they can return home to campaign for the congressional elections that are due to take place in November.

If the generous NIH increase is approved, it will represent a victory for the backers of biomedical research, given current government austerity.

"We are cautiously optimistic," said John Suttie, a biochemist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is president of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, responding to reports that negotiators from the House of Representatives and the Senate had agreed on the 6.9 per cent increase.

The new funding shows that biomedicine backers and their chief House advocate, John Porter (Republican, Illinois), have been "tremendously successful", said Peter Kyros, a lobbyist for the Joint Steering Committee, a group of five societies representing laboratory scientists.

The 6.9 per cent figure was first approved by the House of Representatives in a bill funding the Departments of Labor, of Health and Human Services and of Education. That bill passed the House in July. But the Senate Appropriations Committee this month backed a lower, 4.1 per cent NIH increase in its own, parallel bill.

That increase, of \$487 million over 1996, would have resulted in a 1997 NIH budget of \$12.4 billion. This figure compares with the 3.9 per cent increase over 1996 funding requested by the Clinton administration in March.

Senate negotiators are said to have been able to meet the House figure because congressional Republicans had accepted a White House demand that Republicans restore between \$5.1 billion and \$6.5 billion in domestic spending that Clinton requested in his March budget proposal.

Meredith Wadman

Democrats score highest in 'votes for science' review

Washington. Three Texan Democrats are the most stalwart supporters of science in the US House of Representatives, according to a scorecard compiled by Science Watch, a new lobby group, based on 30 key science-related votes over the past two years.

Ken Bentsen, Sheila Jackson Lee and Eddie Bernice Johnson each voted "for science" 97 per cent of the time — 29 of the 30 votes — earning them top place in Science Watch's league table. Overall, Democrats voted in favour of science twice as often as Republicans.

Science Watch was set up by a bipartisan group of science leaders, including Roland Schmitt and James Duderstadt, both former chairmen of the National Science Board, several Nobel laureates, and Allan Bromley, science adviser to George Bush, the last Republican president.

Having selected the 30 key votes from a shortlist of 100 science-related votes in the 104th Congress, the group found a massive gulf between Republican and Democrat members. Democrats voted for what Science Watch took to be the "pro-science" position 70 per cent of the time, against a Republican average of 35 per cent.

"We didn't expect the party difference," says Martin Apple, executive officer of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents, and chief executive of the watchdog organization. "The degree to which we found it was extraordinary."

Republicans have reacted angrily to the findings, rejecting Science Watch's choice of criteria. "The bottom line of this survey is that, if you're a big spender, you get an 'A'," says Robert Walker (Republican, Pennsylvania), chairman of the House Science Committee, who got a rating of 40 per cent. Walker fired off a letter to the lobby group,

saying: "I hope that in future you will review your methodology and not succumb to the temptation to further politicize science."

But Apple says that the scorecard did not necessarily favour big spenders, as the budget votes which it considered generally involved a transfer of money between science agencies and other accounts, rather than additional spending. The scorecard included 17 such money-related votes, but also votes on the prohibition of certain types of environmental and embryo research, on peer review, science education and the elimination of certain science agencies.

Walker says the list ignores Republican actions to secure funding for basic research. He describes the inclusion of the embryo question as "a cheap shot, since the decision of most members on that vote was a matter of conscience, not a question of science".

Other Texan Democrats also scored more than 90 per cent in the survey, as did John Murtha (Democrat, Pennsylvania) and George Brown (Democrat, California). Republicans who fared best in the exercise, scoring more than 50 per cent, included Tom Davis (Virginia), Sherwood Boehlert (New York), Connie Morella (Maryland) and Vernon Ehlers (Michigan).

Scorecards of this type are often kept by special interest groups in the United States, and used in a none-too-subtle manner to influence elections. But the publication of such a list by an eminent group of scientists before November's congressional elections will, reopen the question of whether the science community has either the muscle or inclination to operate in this realm.

Schmitt, who constructed the survey with Apple, conceded that its publication was risky. "Not everyone will agree with our approach," he says.

Colin Macilwain

Call for regional research boost in Europe

Brussels. The spending guidelines for the European Union (EU)'s so-called 'structural funds', which are intended to reduce the gap in competitiveness between rich and poor regions of Europe, should be changed to allow more money to be used to strengthen the research base of member states, a senior official of the European Commission said last week.

Eneko Landaburu, director general of the commission's regional development and cohesion directorate, was speaking at the third Regional Science and Technology Policy Research (RESTPOR) conference hosted by the commission in Brussels. He said that 7 per cent of

structural funds allocated so far — equivalent to ECU7 billion (US\$5.6 billion) — had been spent directly on improving the infrastructure for research and development (R&D) in "less favoured" regions.

But this is not enough, he said, given the links that exist between research and competitiveness. Landaburu criticized the governments of the EU's member states for not giving priority to research in their applications for structural funds, part of which are also known as cohesion funds. Governments preferred to emphasize more visible projects, such as road-building, with greater appeal to voters.

Alison Abbott