

# Report to Congress 'ducks major issues'

[WASHINGTON] The US Congress should provide "stable and substantial" funding for scientific research, with fundamental research its priority, and "resist concentrating funds in a particular area", says an 80-page science policy document prepared by Vernon Ehlers (Republican, Michigan).

The long-awaited document was prepared for Newt Gingrich (Republican, Georgia), chairman of the House of Representatives, and, according to Ehlers, is the first science policy study of its type to originate in Congress. It calls for a pilot programme to semi-privatize one of the Department of Energy's large laboratories, and for "standardized peer review procedures" at all government agencies.

But critics say the document contains little that is new, and fails to address the fundamental problem of how Congress determines science budgets. George Brown (Democrat, California), the ranking minority member of the Science Committee, says

it "undergirds the status quo" and that he will not endorse it. "It doesn't go as far or reach as deeply as I'd like," he says, although he adds that he is "willing to work" with Ehlers and others "to move forward".

Ehlers says the document — "*Unlocking Our Future: Toward A New National Science Policy*" — "demonstrates that the Congress is aware of the importance of science". He describes it as a "commencement" on what he expects will be a lengthy process to develop agreed positions on a number of science policy issues.

But Gingrich, who joined Ehlers, Brown and James Sensenbrenner (Republican, Wisconsin) for a press conference to launch the document, was notably cautious in his praise. "This is a very good start, but it really only scratches the surface of what, over the next four of five years, will have to be a very important national dialogue," he said.

Answering questions, Ehlers conceded that Gingrich — who complained of scien-



Let-down? Ehlers (left) concedes Gingrich (right) was seeking more radical proposals.

tific articles "written in such a way that if your aren't in the discipline you don't understand [them]" — would have liked a more radical set of proposals, and "more risk-taking, not just with regard to science but with regard to science policy".

Gingrich asked Ehlers to carry out the study in early 1997, when Ehlers, voted second "brainiest member" in a poll of Capitol Hill staff in *Washingtonian* magazine, had failed to land the chairmanship of one of the Science Committee's subcommittees.

Scientific and engineering societies and university officials had helped Ehler's small staff prepare the study, and most were satisfied with the result. "What's important today is having the Congress engaged", says Charles Vest, president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an early supporter of the project. The study, he says, "doesn't address every aspect or nuance of science policy — nevertheless it is a very thoughtful report".

But Democrat politicians say that Ehlers underestimated the difficulties of saying anything profound, and ended up leaving untouched major questions such as how to prioritize research and better coordinate the activities of different agencies and congressional committees. "It doesn't reflect the more advanced thinking about changes that need to be made — in particular, the responsibility of science to connect its work to the needs of society," says Brown.

The document is likely to be quickly endorsed by most members of the Science Committee, including some Democrats, and Ehlers hopes that a resolution in support will be passed by the House of Representatives before it goes into recess next week. Science lobbyists hope the process will help lend impetus to a proposal to double spending on research and development over the next 12 years, which currently has the support of 29 US senators (see *Nature* 394, 5; 1998). **Colin Macilwain**

## US stays in global fusion deal — for a year

[WASHINGTON] Bill Richardson, the US energy secretary, signed a statement of intent last week that will allow the United States to continue work on the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) design until next July.

The move has relieved fears among other nations participating in ITER that a complete US withdrawal would paralyse the global fusion energy research project (see *Nature* 394, 511; 1998).

Richardson signed the statement at the International Atomic Energy Agency conference in Vienna, after coming under heavy pressure from Japanese, European and Russian officials. Russia is said by one source to have threatened to block important agreements on the disposal of nuclear weapons materials unless the United States stayed on board.

The statement says that the United States will participate in the three-year extension to the ITER engineering design activity — which Europe, Japan and Russia agreed to in July — for a period of one year. "Participation in this process will be subject to the availability of appropriated funds and is not a commitment to construct a device," it says, reiterating the US desire for "a new international agreement on fusion science".

Richardson called Joseph McDade (Republican, Pennsylvania), chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee which funds his department, from Vienna to obtain his agreement to the statement. But both the agreement and the call to McDade infuriated another congressman, James

Sensenbrenner, the chairman of the House Science Committee, who was not consulted.

Sensenbrenner immediately issued an angry statement condemning the deal, and describing the decision as "irresponsible". He added: "The project has failed and it's time to move forward. It defies common sense that the United States should agree to continue to participate in a dead-end project that continues to waste the American taxpayer's dollars".

Energy department officials were surprised at the vehemence of this, pointing out that Sensenbrenner had previously said that he was neutral on ITER, and merely wished McDade's concerns to be addressed. Ernie Moniz, the energy undersecretary, wrote to Sensenbrenner on his return from Vienna saying that the twelve month agreement will "allow for an orderly closing out of US participation under the existing agreement, and a reasonable transition to a new one."

Even at that, the statement was greeted with relief in the US fusion community. "I'm very, very pleased," says Anne Davies, head of fusion energy sciences at the Department of Energy. "This gives us a way forward."

Susumu Nakamura, director of fusion energy at Japan's Science and Technology Agency, says: "It is encouraging that the United States is at least showing some willingness to continue with the ITER collaboration". But he also says that the STA "believes that the one year extension is renewable," a view which Moniz's letter appears to contradict. **Colin Macilwain**