US science budget

Congress outdoes President

Washington

PRESIDENT Reagan is learning the hard way that even when presidents believe they are being generous, Congress is likely to disagree. In his 1984 budget request last April, the President proposed major increases for most areas of scientific research. Total federal research and development was promised an increase of 17 per cent over 1983 and basic research was to increase by 10 per cent, including an 18 per cent increase for the National Science Foundation. After eight months of congressional wrangling, it seems that Congress has been even more generous to science, although its research priorities are rather different.

Department of Defense: The President's defence budget, the most controversial part of his 1984 spending plan, is bound to be reduced when it is finally debated on the floor of Congress. The defence subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee voted last week for a total budget of $250,000 million — some $10,000 million less than the President wanted. The Pentagon's basic research programme, much of which finances work in the universities, suffered a last-minute setback when the House Appropriations Committee sliced $30 million from the President's request of $850 million. The outcome will depend on a House–Senate conference.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration: NASA's appropriations bill has been passed and the agency's 1984 operating plan is almost identical with President Reagan's request for space science. Physics and astronomy will get $567 million instead of the $514 million the President requested, but most of the increase will pay for cost increases on the Space Telescope.

National Institutes of Health: NIH are operating under the continuing resolution, which expires on 15 November. However, the House of Representatives has already passed a generous appropriations bill and the Senate is completing action on a virtually identical measure. Both give NIH $4,460 million, give or take a million — a substantial increase, as expected, over the President's request. Congress's appropriation will maintain the number of extramural grants at 5,000, while restoring cuts that had been made in other programmes to meet this goal. The congressional action also will do away with the administration proposal to cut indirect costs, or overheads, on grants to 90 per cent of current levels and to renegotiate direct costs on existing grants downwards by 8–12 per cent.

Congress's stalemated attempts to pass an authorization bill for NIH do not affect their research activities, which operate under standing legislative authority.

National Science Foundation: The President got everything he asked for from Congress, together with a lot that he did not want in the form of science education programmes. The total increase for the NSF budget this year comes to 21 per cent — a total of $1,320 million. Research and related activities receive $1,242 million, including $15 million earmarked for high technology instrumentation and $5 million to be set aside for instrumentation at non-PhD-granting universities. It is up to NSF itself to allocate the total which it is sure to follow the plan in the President's budget, which emphasizes mathematics and physical sciences. The President also calls for NSF to award, within its regular grant programme, $180 million for instrumentation.

In the battle to see who could appear more concerned about the supposedly desperate state of American mathematics and science education, the bidding in Congress reached $70 million for NSF's educational activities. In addition to the teacher training programme and graduate fellowships that the President asked for ($30 million), Congress's appropriation includes funds for curriculum development, something that the Reagan Administration has been philosophically opposed to.

Department of Energy: In basic energy sciences research and development — which includes high-energy and nuclear physics — the President also received everything he asked for, but not in the way he wanted. The congressional appropriation cuts the administration request for the planned National Center for Advanced Materials (NCAM) at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory from $25 million to a mere $3 million, the result of criticism that the proposal had not been properly reviewed and of some pork-barrel entrepreneurship on the floor of the House by Catholic University and Columbia University. The Stanford Linear Collider, Burton Richter's ingenious electron–proton accelerator that may yet be on line before the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN)'s LEP, was granted 80 per cent of the administration's $40 million request. Construction will begin this year.

The administration's attempt to cut back on solar and other non-nuclear energy research and development met with stiff opposition. Solar, which the administration wanted slashed in half, was given $174 million, down only slightly from 1983 levels. Geothermal, fossil and conservation — all slated for a similar cut — will all be maintained at close to 1983 levels. Nuclear fission research, which was to receive an increase in the administration's plan, however, was cut by over one-third from the 1983 level of $746 million.

Department of Agriculture: Although a final appropriation has not been passed for USDA yet, the House and Senate have approved separate, somewhat different versions, that at least indicate what the final appropriation will be. The major difference between the two bills is in the competitive grants programme, the only source of agricultural research support open to non-land-grant universities. In the House, Representative Jamie Whitten (Democrat, Mississippi), a perennial foe of the programme, succeeded in cutting not only the small $4 million increase proposed by the administration, but a further $7 million from the heart of the programme as well — leaving a mere $10 million. The Senate went along with the administration request and voted $21 million.

The House would hold the two major USDA research programmes roughly to 1983 levels ($233 million for the formula funds that support research at land-grant universities, $470 million for the in-house Agricultural Research Service); the Senate would increase both by a few per cent. □

US risk assessment

Congress looks to Academy

Washington

UNDAUNTED by a string of previous failures, Congress is considering new legislation designed to improve the way federal agencies regulate hazardous substances. A bill emerging last week from the House of Representatives subcommittee on science research and technology would have the National Academy of Sciences create an expert board to review the scientific basis of regulations derived from risk analysis techniques. Its recommendations would not be binding but agencies which ignored them would be required to give a detailed public explanation of their decision.

The bill, proposed by New York Republican David Martin, is a watered-down version of a controversial measure first proposed three years ago to create a national science council to resolve scientific disputes arising from regulatory decisions. Under that proposal, the council's decisions would have been binding and any member of the public would have been able to refer issues to it. Martin's board, however, would discuss individual regulatory decisions only when asked by the federal government and the scope of its review would be narrower.

Unlike the earlier proposal, Martin's bill has a good chance of becoming law. He claims to have cleared the proposals with the National Academy and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Moreover, during the subcommittee deliberations last week, the bill was incorporated in another bill, the Risk Research and Demonstration Bill, which already enjoys widespread support.

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