

NSF wins approval for 'new' research strategy

Washington. The US National Science Foundation (NSF) seems to have successfully headed off a threat by a Senate subcommittee to given some of its research funds to other agencies unless it switches more money from fundamental to applied research.

Last autumn, the appropriations subcommittee responsible for scrutinizing the NSF's budget told the agency, which pays for most non-biomedical research at US universities, that it would lose congressional favour unless it raised the proportion of research aimed at "strategic goals" to 60 per cent.

But at a hearing in Washington last week, Barbara Mikulski (Democrat, Maryland),

the chairwoman of the subcommittee, told Neal Lane, the director of the NSF, that the agency had already achieved "exactly what we wanted it to achieve". This was "an astounding accomplishment, knowing where you were last year", she said.

Lane told the subcommittee that he had set up a planning committee last month, and that this will report in May on how well the agency is meeting its strategic goals. A new financial tracking system is already in place, he said, and divisional directors are being encouraged to produce strategic plans similar to last autumn's Branscomb Committee report on high performance computing,

which Mikulski warmly praised.

"We're seeing an increased focus on basic math, physics and engineering research that addresses strategic goals," says Lane. This carefully chosen form of words appears to satisfy Mikulski — even though Lane's budget proposal for NSF contains none of the feared cuts in areas of basic scientific research.

Last autumn's tough language from the Senate subcommittee alarmed many basic researchers. But it appears to have been aimed less at NSF's basic research programme than at critics of the agency's bid for continued expansion at a time of fiscal constraint.

Both Mikulski's committee and its House counterpart will process the president's requested 6 per cent increase in NSF's budget during the summer. The final amount allocated to building new research laboratories is likely to be increased, with a corresponding reduction in extra money for research projects. There are already strong indications that the total Clinton budget for 1995 will be substantially reduced by Congress, affecting budget projections at the NSF and all other science-funding agencies.

Separately, the first NSF authorization bill since 1988 is likely to be finalized by the House Science Space and Technology (SST) committee this week. A Republican amendment that would bar the NSF from giving any grants to universities that accept earmarked funds from Congress is likely to fail, after committee chairman George Brown (California, Democrat) declined to support such a move.

Colin Macilwain

Senate boost for technology plans

Washington. The Clinton administration's ambitious plans to implement a wide-ranging technology policy received a boost last week when the Senate passed a bill authorizing a major expansion of the federal government's programmes to assist industry.

But the budgetary provisions of the National Competitiveness Act, much of which was originally drafted by Vice President Al Gore when he was still a senator, were scaled back by a third under pressure from Republican critics. The bill now proceeds to a conference with two related bills already passed by the House of Representatives, probably resulting in a final version for both houses to pass and the president to sign by the end of the year.

One of the most significant parts of the Senate bill expands programmes through which the government part-funds small companies to apply new technology or bring it to market. The focal point for this activity will be the Commerce Department's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), although the Senate's version of the bill spreads some of the responsibility to other government departments.

Other sections of the bill authorize research to support the development of the so-called information superhighway. The amount of money to be spent on this is small compared to private sector investment in telecommunications. But Gore believes that it can play a crucial role in ensuring that the superhighway can be used by schools, hospitals, government departments and low-income households.

Although industry lobby groups support the programmes designed to help small businesses, Republican opponents of the bill remain sceptical about the way in which Ron Brown, Commerce Secretary and former Democratic Party chairman, will use the money. Despite the due processes to which NIST must adhere in allocating the funds, they are concerned that money will be used

to shore up Democratic support in key states such as California.

But, wary of recent Clinton attacks on them for resisting everything he proposed in Congress, the Republicans stepped back from talking out the bill, and struck a deal allowing it to pass with a total two-year funding cut from \$2.8 billion to \$1.9 billion.

Another contentious issue that remains to be resolved between the House and the Senate is the so-called Manton amendment to the House version, which excludes companies with foreign directors from participating in any of the technology schemes. The Senate is prepared to unite with the administration and industry lobby groups to try to remove the Manton amendment from the bill.

Colin Macilwain

Women in industry to get a helping hand

San Francisco. A programme launched three years ago in US universities to support younger women scientists by pairing them up with a more experienced 'mentor' is about to be extended to scientists working in industry.

The programme is run by the Association for Women in Science (AWIS), and has been developed with success in universities across the United States, with 32 separate chapters participating in 1993.

The Palo Alto chapter of AWIS already has been working with a few women who work in industry to encourage a greater business perspective among science students at Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley and at San Francisco.

The chapter now plans to extend the mentors' services to women scientists working in local biotechnology and high technology companies. The aim is to help companies both retain key scientists and develop their potential, says Sherrie

Wilkins, president of the chapter.

Shirley Johnson, head of a research and development group at Biocircuits Corp. in Sunnyvale and a co-director of the AWIS mentoring programme this year, says that relationships established through the programme provide an important form of support to women scientists at all levels.

Johnson says one of the aims of AWIS is to increase the number of women who are successful in scientific careers. At present, only 36 per cent of women who teach science or engineering at four-year colleges and universities hold tenured positions, compared with 59 per cent of men.

The national AWIS mentoring programme over the past three years helped pairs of women develop strong relationships that would guide a less-experienced partner through practical matters such as how to work with a principal investigator on a project, or how to look for a job.

Sally Lehrmann