

1997 budget confirms US science faces a period of flat funding

Washington. The fourth and final budget of President Bill Clinton's first term was submitted on Tuesday to Congress. The budget, for the 1997 financial year which starts 1 October, promises increases of close to the rate of inflation (3 per cent) for the main science funding agencies, and the restoration of technology and environmental research programmes cut by Congress last year.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) asks for a 3.9 per cent increase (see below), although two-thirds of this will be consumed by the construction costs of a new clinical centre building at the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland. The Department of Energy requests a 2.5 per cent increase in its non-weapons research budget, while the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA), is asking for roughly the same as the current year (see page 188).

Most other research-funding agencies are requesting little more for 1997 than they received in their last properly-completed appropriation in 1995. This bears out fears that US science is facing a period of flat funding, steadily eroded by inflation.

The National Science Foundation (NSF),

for example, is requesting \$3.325 billion, only 3 per cent more than it received in 1995. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA)'s request for \$2.1 billion reflects the same trend.

The 1997 budget has been released even though the final budget figures for 1996 remain incomplete. Agencies which have an agreed 1996 budget, such as NIH, were able this week to present their proposed 1997 figures relative to that baseline. But other agencies could only compare their proposed budgets to an estimate of what they will receive this year.

In most cases, that estimate was based on the temporary funding they currently receive, which expires tomorrow (22 March). If Congress and the President cannot reach agreement on the 1996 budget, that temporary funding may be extended to 30 September, when the financial year ends.

The Department of Energy (DOE), whose research budget was cut sharply this year from \$2.7 billion to \$2.5 billion, is asking for an increase of only 2.4 per cent in its energy research programmes next year, and 2.7 per cent in its physics programmes.

Within these totals, the DOE wants to restore some money to its fusion energy programme, raising the latter's budget by 12 per cent to \$256 million. But it also plans to cut biological and environmental research by 7 per cent, to \$380 million.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is emphasizing research spending over the educational and other activities in its budget request, which is up 4.6 per cent on the agency's estimated 1996 spending level of \$3.18 billion. NSF's support for research and related activities will grow by 8.7 per cent from the 1996 estimate, to \$2.47 billion.

Of the NSF's seven directorates, engineering does best, with a proposed 12 per cent increase, mostly for grants to independent investigators. But the NSF wants to eliminate funding for equipment and improvements at university laboratories, which Congress traditionally favours, and which received \$100 million in 1996.

The Clinton administration also promised to restore environmental and technology programmes that have been cut this year at the Department of Commerce. Ron Brown, the commerce secretary, concedes that his original objective of expanding the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to a \$1.4-billion agency this year had been "significantly revised". But he is pledging that he will continue with NIST's technology programmes.

NIST is seeking a budget of \$823 million in 1997, up sharply from the \$580 million which the agency will get this year at current spending levels. The figure would include \$345 million for the Advanced Technology Programme, which Congress wants to eliminate, and \$105 million for major laboratory construction work at NIST's site in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is requesting an 8.3 per cent increase in funding, from \$1.938 billion to \$2.099 billion. James Baker, NOAA's administrator, says he is happy with the request. But it concedes a lot of ground to the agency's critics in Congress: the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, which supports most basic research at NOAA, is demanding just \$233 million — sharply down from the \$271 million it requested last year.

The Department of Defense did not release details of its research budget plans this week. But its total spending on research, development, test and evaluation will be \$34.7 billion, down slightly from last year's \$34.9 billion.

Colin Macilwain

A shot in the arm for clinical research

Washington. President Bill Clinton has asked the US Congress to approve a 3.9 per cent increase in funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the \$1.64-trillion 1997 budget that he sent to Capitol Hill earlier this week.

Almost exactly two-thirds of the \$467-million increase, which raises the NIH's budget to \$12.4 billion, would go towards building a new, 250-bed clinical research facility on the NIH campus. The \$310 million for the proposed 250,000-square foot Clinical Research Center (CRC) would be spent over a period lasting until the centre's projected completion early next century.

Most of the remainder of the increase sought for the institutes — about \$135 million — will be used to boost the funds available for research grant applications received from non-NIH scientists. The NIH will fund 207 new multi-year grants in 1997, reaching a total of 6,827.

Meanwhile, routine inflationary increases for external scientists who already receive multi-year grants will be cut from 4 to 2 per cent. Harold Varmus, the director of NIH, calls this a "measurable

sacrifice" that researchers are likely to be willing to accept. And almost all other NIH programmes will see their funding either remain constant or decrease.

Varmus said on Monday that the construction of the new Clinical Research Center was essential. "This is the best year to do it. But we're doing everything we can to protect the extramural grant community," he said, pointing out that most of the increased funding is needed to replace a decrepit 1953 building that he recently described as an imminent "threat" to NIH patients and personnel. "We're getting that much because the president and the administration have decided it's important" to build the new centre, says Varmus.

Ralph Bradshaw, the president of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, which last month called for a 6.5 per cent increase in the NIH budget, said that although his organization felt that an increase of 6.5 per cent would have been the "appropriate number", any proposed increase at the NIH would obviously be viewed favourably.

Meredith Wadman