Clinton flails Congress over $1.8 billion civilian R&D cuts

AP

Washington

The Clinton administration has vigorously attacked Republican plans to cut research spending at science agencies, signalling its intention of portraying Congress as hostile to science, technology and innovation during budget negotiations this autumn.

John Podesta, President Bill Clinton's chief of staff, made science and technology the focal point of a high-profile address on budget issues at Washington's National Press Club on 1 September.

"This year, the Republican-led Congress, to make room for its risky tax plan, is playing politics with science and technology funding," said Podesta. He warned that the planned cuts were "threatening the potential progress of innovation in America".

Podesta said that the proposals so far amounted to a $1.8 billion cut in civilian research and development funding, of which $1 billion is at NASA (see below), while projects worth an additional $1 billion had been allocated to specific institutions — "undermining peer review and slashing funding for higher-priority projects".

The attack is intended to put Republicans on the defensive as they return to Washington this week to complete work on the bill and on another, even more contentious, that will contain funding for the National Institutes of Health.

Science lobbyists are delighted by the high-profile defence of science and technology programmes, though it is unclear where the money will come from to restore their funding. Clinton and Congress are committed to agree a budget that falls within tight caps agreed in 1997. Podesta told reporters that Clinton's original budget proposal, published in February, could fit within these limits — but few independent observers believe this is possible.

Podesta: 'Congress is playing politics'.

James Sensenbrenner (Republican, Wisconsin), chair of the House Science Committee, said Clinton's plan "depends on budgetary tricks such as tax hikes and user fees that will never be enacted".

Congress allocated more to research and development than the administration had asked for in three of the past four years, Sensenbrenner added. "We hope the president's staff view science funding as a priority, not a short-lived political gimmick."

But Sensenbrenner faces embarrassment this month if, as seems likely, bills are passed that cut science programmes to levels well below those authorized earlier in the year by his committee. One lobbyist said Sensenbrenner "lacked friends" to help him defend the programmes under his jurisdiction.

President Clinton, too, lacks friends in Washington, but he knows a political opening when he sees one, and looks set to emerge with most of the credit if funding for the programmes is restored. **Colin Macilwain**

NASA could lose 'best-value space projects'

NASA

Washington

The proposed $1 billion cut to NASA's budget request is aimed at the small, focused science projects that are a hallmark of the agency's 'faster, better, cheaper' philosophy, observers say.

The committee "cut the programmes that had the least political constituency," says one congressional staffer. These include Discovery planetary missions, the Explorer programme and a line of low-cost Earth Probes.

The House appropriators cut $265 million from the $2.2 billion request for space science and $301 million from the $1.46 billion Earth-science request. Cuts in the Explorer programme would stop NASA initiating new small and medium-sized missions in space physics and astronomy. Among endangered Discovery projects are the CONTOUR mission to tour several comet nuclei, the Deep Impact asteroid probe and the MESSENGER mission to explore Mercury. Also under threat are the Gamma-ray Large Area Space Telescope, US participation in Europe's Far Infrared and Submillimetre Telescope, and the Pluto–Kuiper Express mission.

Mission impossible? The Pluto-Kuiper Express is under threat.

Two Earth science projects would be lost: the Triana spacecraft to provide continuous pictures of Earth, and an Earth-viewing radar called LightSAR. Work to develop a follow-on to the Earth Observing System multi-instrument platforms would stop.

The cuts would hit academic scientists too: NASA estimates that a $35 million reduction in its research budget would eliminate 600 grants. **Tony Reichhardt**

Astronomers deflect scare-stories heading for media overkill

Boston

The International Astronomical Union (IAU) is ready to implement guidelines designed to ensure that predictions of asteroids heading for the Earth are vetted before they appear in newspapers.

The guidelines were written at a meeting in Torino, Italy, after last year's predictions that the asteroid 1997 XF11 might hit Earth in 2028. Astronomers were ridiculed after the calculations were revised. The meeting also agreed the Torino Impact Hazard Scale, to quantify risks.

"The guidelines are designed to ensure that accurate and verified information is presented to the public," says Richard Binzel, an astronomer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and chief architect of the hazard rating system.

The voluntary guidelines may not become official until next summer. They call for astronomers to make their data available to an IAU-assembled review panel if they discover an asteroid rated one or higher on the Torino scale, meaning an Earth impact cannot be ruled out.

The review team would check calculations within 72 hours. If it concludes there is a significant impact risk, its analysis will be made public on the IAU website.

The guidelines have been circulated to some 600 scientists worldwide, says David Morrison of the NASA Ames Research Center, president of the working group that devised them. "If somebody comes up with a prediction of a potential impact, they could use this service today," he says.

"Astronomers are free to go public without seeking this peer review," adds Hans Rickman of the Uppsala Astronomical Observatory in Sweden, the IAU's assistant general secretary, "but their statements would have less credibility than if they'd gone through the process and had their calculations checked." **Steve Nadis**