

naturejobs

**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

In response to a severe financial downturn, US president Franklin Roosevelt invested in the country's roads and infrastructure. And in the face of the current international slump, President-elect Barack Obama has pledged to do the same. Such projects generate jobs and assist in the transport and delivery of goods and services, providing a much-needed boost for a sluggish economy. But some say that science investment can pay similar dividends.

Edwin Mansfield from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia calculated that every dollar invested in academic research yields \$1.28 in social benefits (E. Mansfield *Res. Pol.* **20**, 1-12; 1991). He showed, for example, that some drugs would not have been developed without university research. Addressing biomedical research in particular, economists Kevin Murphy and Robert Topel from the University of Chicago in Illinois have claimed that reductions in the number of people dying from heart disease translated into an extra \$1.5 trillion a year for the economy from 1970 to 1990, as people had longer and more productive working lives. They also calculated that reducing deaths from cancer by just 1% would save the economy around \$500 billion (K. M. Murphy and R. Topel *The Economic Value of Medical Research*; Univ. Chicago, 1999). By this rationale, science should be a high budgetary priority for countries, even when discretionary spending is scarce.

And so it is in some nations. China, for instance, remains steadfastly committed to major environmental science and biomedical research projects, despite having seen a significant drop in growth (see page 155). And in the United States, Obama has advocated that the government kick-start a 'green economy' to generate jobs and, presumably, a self-sustaining industry that lessens dependence on fossil fuels. Although it may seem counterintuitive to some policy-makers, the careful spending of research money can boost the economy, rather than simply draining the coffers. Bridges and roads to scientific progress, it seems, are also worthwhile investments.

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