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**THE CAREERS
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With one phrase in his inaugural address, US President Barack Obama raised hopes for a significant increase in federal science funding. Obama pledged “to restore science to its rightful place”. This phrase could have been a rebuke to former president George W. Bush, for his stance against embryonic stem-cell research and reluctance to act on global warming. But Obama’s words could also be heard as a promise to counteract several years of relatively flat funding for agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

The speech comes a week after the US House of Representatives’ appropriations committee announced that it was including science funding hikes as part of an economic stimulus package. Under the plan, the NIH stands to receive a bump of \$3.5 billion over two years and the NSF \$3 billion (see *Nature* **457**, 364–365; 2009). Of course, even if the money materializes in an anticipated February vote, it is unclear exactly how the cash infusion will benefit individual scientists. After the NIH’s budget doubled from 1999 to 2003, to more than \$28 billion a year, not everyone gained. Halfway through that five-year cycle, some grant-seekers found less success than they had hoped, because much of the money had already been committed. The increase also covered major collaborations, large-scale science initiatives and a shift from basic to applied science. And after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, NIH cash was funnelled to biodefence research rather than basic research — \$1.5 billion in 2003. The success rate for NIH grant applicants fell from 33% in 2001 to 20% in 2006, and entry-level postdoc stipends flattened.

The appropriations committee has said that money invested in grants creates other jobs — a major goal of the economic stimulus package. But many questions remain. One is, how much of the money will actually go to individual grants and fellowship programmes? Perhaps the most important question should be, not whether this investment will have a positive effect on both science and the economy, but rather how this windfall can sustain research in the long term.

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