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Environmental Science Sacrificed in Latest US Budget

ADRIENNE FROELICH SPONBERG

In early December, President George Bush told Canadians that by “relying on sound science and mutual goodwill, we can resolve issues.” One week later, he signed a budget for fiscal year 2005 that slashes funding for the federal programs providing the bulk of scientific knowledge on our environment. Together, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) account for 52 percent of all federal spending on environmental science. NSF and NASA’s environmental science programs were cut by more than \$200 million in the most recent budget.

In late November, Congress finished its work on a massive omnibus appropriations bill, HR 4818, weighing in at \$388 billion and containing the nine bills Congress left unfinished before the elections. Among those bills is the one for Veteran’s Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies, which funds both NASA and NSF. While both programs had been slated for only modest increases in the FY 2005 budget, few policy analysts were expecting the 2 to 6 percent cuts levied against the agencies’ environmental science programs.

Also notable among the cuts is a \$107 million, or 2 percent, decrease in funding for NSF. The foundation sponsors more than half of the nation’s nonmedical biological research and a fourth of the environmental research conducted in US universities. Both the biological and geological sciences directorates will be cut by 2 percent. NSF’s education and human resources programs took an even larger hit of 10 percent.

Congressional champions of science are troubled by the cuts, but they had little recourse, given the way in which the budget was finalized this year. The two leading science champions in the House, who also happen to hold PhDs in physics, spoke out against the reductions in research budgets. Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R–MI) called the cuts “short-sighted.” Ehlers said the decision “shows dangerous disregard for our nation’s future, and I am both concerned and astonished that we would make this decision at a time when other nations continue to surpass our students in math and science and consistently increase their funding of basic research.” Rep. Rush Holt (D–NJ) was also concerned about NSF’s funding cuts: “We cannot hope to remain the world’s most scientifically advanced nation if we continue to shortchange our researchers,” he said in a floor statement.

While NSF suffered an overall decrease in funding, NASA fared better in the big picture, with a 4.5 percent increase to \$16.1 billion. However, the boost to NASA is targeted at getting the space shuttle back in flight next year, resuming construction of the space station, and advancing the administration’s moon and Mars programs. NASA’s earth sciences program, which funds a hefty 30 percent of federal environmental science programs, was cut by 6.7 percent. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) noted that the cuts to NASA’s earth science program “confirm the lower priority assigned to space-based observations of Earth” within NASA.

House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY) has previously expressed concern at the “either–

or” approach to NASA’s funding. In an address to the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics in April 2004, Boehlert argued, “We may indeed have to rethink some other programs to fund the exploration initiative, but I’m concerned that the proposed cuts may go too far.” Boehlert added that the cuts to NASA’s earth science program may hinder climate change research, “itself an Administration research priority.” Boehlert believes it is more important to know more about the Earth than it is to know about Mars: “I don’t think it’s a close question. And knowing more about the Earth will take plenty of aerospace know-how.” Boehlert’s committee plans to take up the NASA reauthorization bill next year, so these issues will most likely be the subject of many conversations among policymakers.

Bob Palmer, outgoing staff director for the minority side of the House Science Committee, recently told an audience at AAAS that science seems to be only a medium-level priority on the Hill, adding that “enthusiasm for science in the current political and budgetary climate is just not there anymore.” Although recent congressional action appears to leave little room for optimism, former Rep. John Edward Porter (R–IL) offered some encouragement to the same audience. Porter, who orchestrated the effort in the House to increase funding for the National Institutes of Health, referenced Dickens’s *Old Marley* when he reminded the crowd, “You can change the image of things to come”—words the science community would be wise to heed.

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