

# Congress Is Rejecting Trump's Steep Budget Cuts to Science

After the White House called for billions of dollars in funding reductions, senators and representatives said they wanted to safeguard and even boost funds for basic research.



By William J. Broad

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Congress is racing to undo thousands of cuts to federal science programs that President Trump called for last year when planning the government's current budget.

If enacted, the president's bid for an overall cut in scientific funding to \$154 billion from \$198 billion — a plunge of 22 percent — would have been the largest reduction in federal spending on science since World War II, when Washington and the seekers of nature's secrets began their partnership.

This week, the Senate Appropriations Committee released a bipartisan package of bills that largely scraps Mr. Trump's planned cuts. Analysts say that, if the proposed budgets hold up in the weeks ahead, Congress will set aside roughly \$188 billion for federal research — a drop of about 4 percent from the most recent annual budget.

"That's pretty solid," said Alessandra Zimmermann, a budget analyst at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a scientific group based in Washington. "Congress is really starting to push back."

Surprisingly, analysts foresee a possible rise of more than 2 percent in the budget category known as basic research — the blue-sky variety that produces fundamental strides and spinoffs in fields such as health care and artificial intelligence. Last year, the Trump administration called for a cut in federal basic research of more than one-third.

Mr. Trump sought even larger cuts for the National Science Foundation, which sponsors much of the nation's basic research. He proposed that its budget be slashed to \$3.9 billion from \$8.8 billion, a drop of 56 percent. The Senate package countered with a reduction to \$8.75 billion, or less than 1 percent.

The bipartisan accord on funding science, Ms. Zimmermann said, stands in sharp contrast with the congressional impasse that shut down the government last fall as Democrats and Republicans clashed over the renewal of subsidies for the Affordable Care Act.

“They’re working together now,” she said. “It’s a return to normalcy.” The new cooperation, Ms. Zimmermann added, is “promising for the eventual passage of the bills.”

Each year, the president submits a budget request to Congress in advance of the annual appropriations process. Only Congress has the power of the purse.

In a statement, Senator Patty Murray of Washington State, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, praised the package of bills as good not only for investigating nature but also for enhancing public safety and the welfare of American families.

“Democrats fought to protect investments that matter,” she said. The package, she added, “rejects President Trump’s push to let our competitors do laps around us.”

Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine and chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, called the package “a fiscally responsible” move that will “spur scientific research necessary to maintain U.S. competitiveness.”

The Senate package includes \$24.4 billion for NASA (a 1.6 percent cut), \$8.8 billion for the Environmental Protection Agency (a 4 percent cut), \$8.4 billion for the Department of Energy Office of Science (a 1.9 percent increase), \$6.2 billion for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (roughly flat), \$1.4 billion for the U.S. Geological Survey (a 2 percent cut) and \$1.2 billion for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (a 2.3 percent increase).

The bipartisan package of bills includes \$6.2 billion for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Marco Bello/Reuters

In New York City, the package would aid scientists displaced by the closure of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, which was famously located upstairs from Tom's Restaurant at Broadway and West 112th Street, near Columbia University. The diner's facade appears in "Seinfeld" episodes.

On Thursday, the House voted to approve the Senate package. Many federal programs have recently had their budgets frozen at last year's levels. Congress, eager to avoid another shutdown, is working to pass spending bills before stopgap measures expire on Jan. 30.

So far, the House's moves on this year's science budgeting add up to an estimated total of \$185 billion — close to the Senate figure of \$188 billion, and putting the two chambers not far apart for negotiations on a final budget.

The improved budgetary picture cannot undo the damage that the Trump administration's frenzy of budget cutting and administrative chaos brought to the nation's scientific establishment, analysts say. They see the cycles of cuts and reinstatements as taking a toll that in some cases may require years to mend.

Analysts also note that the administration has made policy shifts on how appropriated funds are spent. For instance, the National Institutes of Health, which traditionally

hedged its scientific bets by supporting a wide range of investigators, is now dividing its annual budget into fewer projects.

Even so, science advocates are breathing sighs of relief now that Congress is re-embracing the status quo that in the last century powered the nation's rise and now maintains its status as the world leader in scientific discovery.

"Science is doing OK," Ms. Zimmermann, of the science association, said. "Things are not bad at all, given our expectations."

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