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No Surprises at House Appropriations Hearing on NSF Budget

FYI No. 46, March 25, 1994

Officials of the National Science Foundation completed their annual cycle of hearings before the VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittees on Tuesday with an appearance before Chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) and his House colleagues. Although this hearing took the better part of the day, there were few of the sweeping science policy developments that characterized an earlier Senate hearing (see FYI #43.)

During last week's Senate hearing the impression was given that national science policy was being formulated. Emphasis was on issues such as the role of science and technology in strategic planning and the scientific work force. The House subcommittee hearing touched on these broader issues briefly, with most discussions centered on select NSF programs.

The House hearing began with a brief discussion about the foundation's role in strategic or applied research. NSF Director Neal Lane admitted that defining these terms "have caused us a fair amount of difficulty." Saying that categorizing research is difficult, he estimated that somewhat more than one-half of the budget is in inter-agency strategic areas. Stokes did not directly respond to this statement, asking, however, why OMB affords NSF sizeable budget increases, and the ability of NSF to use its money effectively. Ranking Republican Jerry Lewis (Cal.) was far more searching in his questions about the Senate report language, which he said had sent a "chill" through the academic community.

Many of the subcommittee's questions revolved around constituent interests. Chairman Stokes asked many questions about Education and Human Resource programs, a topic also of interest to Rep. Esteban Torres (D-Cal.) Questioning by Rep. Ray Thornton (D-Arkansas) largely centered on EPSCoR.

The subcommittee discussed the FY 1995 budget request for Research and Related Activities for about one hour. There were no questions about the budgets for the Physics and Astronomy subactivities, or the Geosciences Activity. Questions were asked about environmental clean-up activities and equipment funded through the polar program. There was about fifteen minutes of discussion about the Gemini Telescope and LIGO programs. Director Lane and his senior staff gave assurances that both projects are on track, with the possible exception of minor LIGO schedule slippage. Lane said there was nothing new in the Major Research Equipment pipeline in the near future.

At the conclusion of the hearing Stokes asked about the foundation's request for Academic Research Infrastructure. Last week, Mikulski expressed doubts about the size of this request as well, and it seems a safe bet that this budget will be increased in the appropriations bill. The next stage in this process moves behind closed doors, with the House bill expected to be drafted sometime in May.

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