Science Policy News

Research Programs Big Winner in Budget Deal

Science is a field that understands the value of patience. Incremental changes over a long period of time is usually how knowledge progresses and how most discoveries are made. I think the same can be said about policy. In both cases, the process is lengthy and often flawed, and you rarely get the outcome you expect, but I think that’s what makes it so important to recognize your successes and focus on the times when all of the hard work pays off.

I’d like to think of 2015 as one of those success stories. While 2015 had its shares of ups and downs in the policy world, ultimately, the food, agriculture, and natural resources research enterprise received a victory in the fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget.

The FY 2016 appropriations process got off to a good start, but the main point of contention was the discretionary spending caps that left little room for growth and could even result in budget cuts. From our meetings with congressional offices, we knew that there was considerable support for research programs, but the tight spending caps made any funding increases difficult, if not impossible. Our best hope would be a larger budget deal that would raise the funding caps and give Congress the flexibility to provide some growth to high-priority programs.

Fortunately, when Congress reconvened after the August recess, it was able to reach a two-year budget deal that did in fact raise the budget caps and increase discretionary spending by an additional $80 billion, with $50 billion allocated in FY 2016 and the remaining $30 billion for FY 2017.

Research Agencies See Budget Increases

Because of this extra funding, Congress was able to provide most federal research agencies—including USDA, NSF, and DOE Office of Science—with budget increases! In early December, an omnibus bill that laid out the funding levels for all federal discretionary programs was approved. Overall, the omnibus bill was welcome news for research funding programs.

The omnibus bill provided USDA-ARS with $1.144 billion, a roughly 1% increase. The ARS will also receive $212 million for building and facility improvements based on priorities identified in its Capital Investment Strategy. Additionally, the bill includes $244 million for Hatch Act formula funding for research at state agriculture experiment stations and $476 million to support overall extension service activities.

However, in a big win for our grassroots advocacy efforts, the bill includes $350 million for the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), a $25 million or 7.7% increase over FY 2015 levels. In terms of percentage, AFRI received the biggest increase in funding across all federal research programs.

While NSF only received 1.6% above the FY 2015 enacted level, the greater victory lies with troubling report language that was proposed in the House version of the NSF spending bill. The House version instructed NSF to direct funding away from the Geoscience Directorate, an effort the geoscience community, including SSSA, fought against all year. Fortunately, the omnibus bill does not include this language, and the Geoscience Directorate was granted a reprieve from funding cuts.

The DOE’s Office of Science also fared well, getting a 5.6% bump to $5.35 billion, $7 million more than even the president requested.

Your Hard Work Paid Off

The budget outcome for this year is the kind of success you try to achieve in the lab and the field when a concerted plan, hard work, and patience meet at the right time to give you those results you’ve hoped for. It’s the result of the effort, not only of the Science Policy Office, but the countless Society members who met with, emailed, called, or even tweeted their members of Congress, urging them to support food, agriculture, and natural resources research programs. While this year’s budget process is already under way, we want to congratulate our community on its successful advocacy endeavor and thank our Society members who helped achieve it.

If you’d like to get more involved in science policy, look for updates through our Science Policy Report and Legislative Action Network.