While the first budget and subsequent appropriations process is delayed for almost every new administration, the fiscal year (FY) 2018 budget process has taken this to the extreme. This year’s budget process didn’t begin in earnest until May when President Trump released his first budget proposal. Not only has the process been delayed, it’s also been hampered by the unresolved effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Health Care Act. Health care legislation, tax reform efforts, and budget negotiations are all intertwined. Without resolution of the health care legislation, it’s difficult for lawmakers to gain a clear picture of the fiscal landscape. It’s nearly impossible for Congress to simultaneously undertake two complex, controversial negotiations.

The president’s budget proposed an increase to defense spending of $22 billion and a $57 billion cut to nondefense spending. House appropriators have added additional defense funding beyond the president’s request. The question isn’t whether there will be increased defense spending, it’s simply how much and whether or not it comes at the expense of nondefense programs.

Nondefense spending includes an array of education, public safety, public health, and natural resources programs, but also funds science programs within the USDA, the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Department of Energy (DOE)—Office of Science.

While the Trump Administration proposed to cut R&D spending by nearly 11%, Congress has largely disregarded the cuts proposed in the president’s budget.

Many members of Congress support increased defense spending. Even if they don’t agree on how much, a significant proportion of Congress thinks the administration’s request doesn’t go far enough. Democrats are demanding parity—increases in defense spending should be matched by increases in nondefense spending. There are also budget hawks who are critical of any increased spending.

Dueling Priorities Leave Federal Agencies in a Bind

As you might imagine, these dueling priorities have left the House Budget Committee with a difficult needle to thread. The Committee is expected to unveil a budget resolution that will cut domestic spending, increase defense funding, and require $200 billion in cuts to mandatory spending. The Senate has not even begun to develop its budget resolution as of this writing. The Senate has not even begun to develop its budget resolution as of this writing.

To complicate matters, the House budget would violate the Budget Control Act of 2011, which set spending caps on defense spending. Senate Democrats are unlikely to go along with an appropriations process that increases defense spending at the expense of nondefense programs.