Like any field of science, science policy has its own jargon, and one of the areas in which the jargon can get particularly wonky is the budget process. This is the annual process by which the government funds all of its various discretionary programs—everything from the military, to the postal service, to aid programs and even research programs like those at USDA and the National Science Foundation. The other form of government spending called mandatory spending, or sometimes referred to as entitlements, is not included in the budget process. Programs funded by mandatory spending include Social Security, Medicaid, and interest on our national debt and are essentially on auto-pay despite accounting for 70% of federal spending. Science and research accounts for about 2% of the budget.

“Budget season” unofficially starts with the release of the president’s budget early in the calendar year. Although the deadline for the release of the president’s budget is the first Monday of February, the release is often delayed and sometimes isn’t released until late spring, especially for a new president. Regardless of its released date, the president’s budget is more of a political document than an actual guide for federal spending. It outlines the president’s priorities and can eliminate programs, propose new programs, or provide increases in funding to existing programs that align with those priorities. The president’s budget is frequently used as the jumping off point for outside groups to begin advocating for their funding requests for federal programs of interest.

While it’s colloquially referred to as the “budget process,” the budget that is adopted is only one part and doesn’t actually provide any funding to specific government programs. Both the House and the Senate Budget Committees develop a budget resolution that sets the top line number for government spending. Once the House and Senate have passed their respective budget resolutions, these two bills then go to “conference,” to reconcile the differences in the bills, and a final compromise bill is developed. However, the final budget bill is not signed by the president and does not have the force of law.

Appropriations

The budget resolution serves as a blueprint for the next step in the budget process—appropriations. Both the House and Senate have an appropriations committee that is further divided into 12 subcommittees. Each subcommittee has jurisdiction over certain government programs and determines the exact funding levels for those programs. The subcommittees in both the House and Senate develop their appropriations bills, which are voted on by the subcommittee, then by the full appropriations committee, and then by the full House or Senate. The House and Senate versions are then sent to conference, and the final bill is determined. Each final appropriations bill must go to the President for his signature. The appropriations process is completed when all 12 appropriations bills have gone through this process and have been signed into law before the start of the next fiscal year on 1 October.

In recent years, the entire process has rarely been completed before 1 October. In fact, the last time all appropriations bills were passed individually prior to the start of the fiscal year was 1994. If all 12 appropriations bills have not been signed into law by 1 October, Congress has several options. One option would be to enact a continuing resolution (CR). A CR is sometimes referred to as a “stopgap” bill since it holds current funding levels for all government programs steady for a pre-determined amount of time. A CR can be fairly short, maybe a few weeks if Congress is close to finishing the appropriations bills, or for much longer if the government is experiencing more immediate, pressing needs.
longer, several months or even for the remainder of the fiscal year. Fiscal year 2017 (FY17) began on 1 Oct. 2016, but Congress had not completed the appropriations process, so the government is currently operating under a CR through 28 Apr. 2017.

Another option would be to adopt an omnibus bill. An omnibus is a bill that consists of multiple appropriations bills that are conferenced and passed together as opposed to passing the appropriations bills separately. Continuing resolutions and omnibus bills are not how the budget process is supposed to work, however, and can cause strain on federal agencies when the fiscal year begins and they don’t know exactly how much money they will have to spend.

While the budget process can be complicated, it’s important to understand how and when federal funding is distributed. Understanding and engaging in the budget process allows Societies like ours to advocate for federal research programs at the right time and to the right people. We hope this serves as an introduction to the process that empowers you to make your voice heard.

Industry News

New Plant Impact Quality Standard

Plant Impact plc, a company specializing in research and development of crop enhancement products to improve yields, recently announced the launch of the Pi Quality Standard. The company says this standard “sets demanding and transparent requirements in product efficacy, innovation, safety and compliance.”

The company saw the need for the standard because it says the biostimulant industry sector is “awash with confusing claims but shares very little data, resulting in scepticism that holds back adoption of new technologies that can make a big difference to farm yields and grower income.”

The standard will only be awarded to Pi products that have completed comprehensive multi-year and multi-location trial programs providing independently proven, statistically significant, and transparent data on efficacy.

“This and other criteria concerning safety and compliance, align with and exceed current industry guidelines and legal requirements to create a robust standard that we will monitor and report against annually,” the company said in a press release. Full details can be found at www.PlantImpact.com/QualityStandard.

BASF Expands On Target Application Academy with New Online Training Module

The advent of new and advanced herbicide technologies demands increased stewardship education to ensure proper application and to reduce weed resistance. BASF is responding to this need by expanding its On Target Application Academy (OTAA) stewardship program with an online training module. The new digital training provides growers and applicators easy-to-access best practices for proper and effective herbicide application.

The online module, which can be accessed in the field or at home on any device, includes a series of educational videos that feature tips for a successful application, including drift mitigation, nozzle selection, and proper calibration.

Additionally, applicators seeking to earn Continuing Education Unit (CEU) credits can qualify for 1.0 CEU by completing the OTAA digital training module.

Growers and applicators can take the OTAA training module by visiting www.growsmartuniversity.com clicking on the “Herbicides” tab and selecting the module titled “Making an On Target Engenia Herbicide Application.”

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