

The Federal Maze

Budget, Authorization, and Appropriations Processes

While recognizing that ASHG membership is international and global in scope, this article focuses on U.S. Congressional processes, in which a majority of our members are heavily invested because of National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding. We plan to have an article at a later time on the major funding mechanisms of our international members, because all processes are crucial as our collaborative projects grow in size and complexity.

General Process

The U.S. federal budget process involves the President proposing a budget in February and then authorizing committees and processes in the Congress to approve (or amend) that budget. But it is not until the Appropriations Committees settle on the funding that awards are actually made to the agencies. These Congressional steps should be completed before the federal fiscal year begins in October, but it often happens that Congress cannot come to an agreement, so the Congress must pass a “continuing resolution” (CR) that maintains ongoing funding of the federal agencies at the level of the current year. Without the CR process, the federal governmental agencies would shut down.

Authorization

In addition to budgetary authority, each federal agency is required to be periodically reviewed and its very existence authorized. The NIH had not been reauthorized since 1993 and was several (11) years past due. Over the past 2 years, there has been much debate about this reauthorization process, with suggestions about major changes in the structure of the agency, as well as consolidation of additional authority in the office of the Director. The prevailing sense has been that, although the NIH is a complicated behemoth, the structure of Institutes and Centers (ICs), the general intramural/extramural relationship, and the peer review process were not in disarray. After much debate, at 1:32 A.M. on December 9, 2006, the NIH Reauthorization Bill was passed, and it was signed into law by the President on January 9, 2007.

Major points of interest to the human genetics community include:

- Formal authorization of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) as an Institute rather than a Center.
- Establishment of an agencywide reporting system to be put in place instead of institute-by-institute reporting.
- Creation of a new division in the Office of the Director, called the “Office of Planning and Strategic Initiatives” (OPASI), which will be headed by Dr. Lawrence Krensky.
- Formalization of the Common Fund and a Council of Councils made up of members of individual Institute Advisory Councils. The Common Fund may account for up to 5% of the overall NIH budget and is to serve as an incubator for cross-cutting initiatives.

- Establishment of a formal public process to assess and determine structural changes in NIH at least every 7 years.
- Creation of a program of Demonstration Projects in “Bridging the Science” among agencies and “High Risk, High Reward” programs.

NIH Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2007

Because the federal fiscal year begins on October 1, fiscal year 2007 (FY07) actually started on October 1, 2006. Therefore, the FY07 appropriations process should have been completed by the last Congress in the early fall. They failed to accomplish that goal, requiring the passage of CRs, as previously described, to permit the agencies to continue to operate at the FY06 level. For the working scientist, that was not egregious, because the FY06 levels for NIH were, in fact, higher than the levels initially proposed for FY07.

Subsequently, the scientific community has worked diligently with key legislators to increase the budget over the proposed FY07 levels. We thank all of you who responded to the FASEB alerts and wrote to Congressional leaders at key moments of negotiation. In total, over 7,000 letters were received from scientists. On February 14, the Joint Funding Resolution was passed and appropriated funding as follows:

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| NIH | \$28.93 billion | 2% increase over FY06 |
| National Science Foundation | \$5.92 billion | 6% increase over FY06 |
| Veterans Affairs (Medical Research) | \$412 million | Same as FY06 |
| Department of Energy (Office of Science) | \$3.79 billion | 5.6% increase over FY06 |

The NIH budget included a total increase of \$620 million over FY06. We owe a debt of gratitude to Congressional stalwarts—including Senators Specter, Harkin, and Kennedy, as well as the House leadership—for their continuing effort on behalf of the biomedical research community.

Our work is only beginning for the FY08 process and beyond. We must be consistent in our message: biomedical research funding is an investment in the future health and economic well-being of the country.

The Future

The President has proposed an NIH budget for FY08 of \$28.62 billion (a 0.8% increase from his early assumption of \$28.39 billion for FY07). Because this proposal is well below the currently authorized level, the scientific community must inform the legislators that we must focus on the future. For the Congressional authorization and appropriations debates, FASEB is proposing 6.7% increases for FY08, FY09, and FY10, so that the budget will allow NIH to recover all the purchasing power it has lost since the doubling of the NIH budget was completed in 2003.

We must continue education of our elected officials from the local constituent perspective that additional investment in biomedical research will be returned in health and well-being.

ASHG works very closely with the FASEB Office of Public Affairs in enhancing the flow of information from the Hill. As we move through this Congressional process, you may stay apprised of actions of the Congress by logging on to the FASEB Web site and reading the Washington Update provided biweekly while Congress is in session (<http://opa.faseb.org/pages/Washingtonupdate/>). We will use the blast e-mail process only at crucial times of decision making in Washington, so that we remain efficient in us-

ing our collective voice. However, any additional education that can be accomplished, locally or in Washington, is obviously appreciated.

Although this federal maze seems daunting, it is critical to be familiar with the process in order to speak out effectively on behalf of support for research. If I can be of assistance in visits to the Hill or in other ways, please do not hesitate to contact me at jboughman@ashg.org

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