Science Societies

Research in the 2021 budget

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Photo by David Everett Strickler on Unsplash.

It's that time of year again folks! February is the unofficial start of budget season here in DC, and the whole process begins with the release of the president's budget request. In a welcome return to order, President Trump released his fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget on 10 February. The president's budget request is a largely political document, reflecting the administration's priorities but not having any real authority.

Once again, President Trump has proposed significant cuts to nondefense spending, cuts even below the levels that were negotiated in the most recent two-year budget agreement. One of the casualties of these cuts was federal research and development (R&D) funding. Almost every federal research agency faced at least single-digit funding cuts in the president's budget, with total federal R&D being cut by almost 9%.

One bright spot in the president's budget request, however, can be seen in the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The competitive grants program within NIFA, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), would receive a whopping 41% increase in funding for FY2021, seeing its budget go from $425 million to $600 million.

Robbing Peter to Pay for Paul?

Unfortunately, most of the other NIFA programs received funding cuts in order to provide the $175 million funding increase for AFRI. ASA, CSSA, and SSSA have always supported robust investments in both competitive and capacity funding at NIFA. While the Societies appreciate that the administration would highlight the AFRI program in its budget, the "robbing Peter to pay Paul" mentality doesn't provide real growth to agriculture research.

While the president's budget was tough on federal R&D programs overall, it did include a new research initiative focusing on investments in "Industries of the Future," specifically artificial intelligence (AI), quantum information sciences (QIS), advanced communications, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing. The budget calls for doubling federal investments in AI and QIS R&D by 2022. These investments would span multiple federal research agencies, including the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy Office of Science, the National Institutes of Health, and USDA. In fact, $100 million of the increase to AFRI would go specifically to grants that would enhance the use of AI in agricultural systems.

So where do science advocates like you go from here? Even though President Trump has recommended significant cuts to most federal R&D Programs, it is Congress who holds the power of the purse and is responsible for allocating federal funding through the annual appropriations process. Historically, Congress has overwhelmingly disregarded the president's budget request, especially when it comes to federal research programs.

Congress is working *right now* on the setting funding priorities for FY2021. Now is a great time to email, call, or even schedule a meeting with your members of Congress to let them know how important federal research funding is. Tell them about your work and the challenges you are trying to address. Urge Congress to prioritize funding for food, agriculture, and natural resources research during the FY2021 appropriations process.

See the full budget details here: **www.agronomy.org/science-policy/issues/research-funding**.

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