Science Societies

Endless Frontiers Act reimagines National Science Foundation

By Julie McClure

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Members of Congress often pick a one or two issues they can "champion" during their tenure. While there are lots of issues they can throw their support behind, unfortunately, science is not often high on the list. That's why it was so exciting to hear about a new piece of bipartisan legislation introduced in both the House and Senate that would direct a significant funding influx to the National Science Foundation (NSF). The *Endless Frontiers Act* is a comprehensive piece of legislation that would authorize more than $100 billion in new funding to NSF over the next five years.

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The bill is the result of more than a year of work from the Senate's top Democrat, Sen. Chuck Schumer (NY), and Republican Senator, Todd Young (IN). A top priority of the senators is enhancing the U.S. position as a leader in global competitiveness. To compete with other global powers, the bill not only invests *more* in science and technology, but also invests *differently*.

The bill proposes a major reorganization of NSF, creating a new Technology Directorate and renaming the agency to the National Science and Technology Foundation. The newly established Technology Directorate would lead research in 10 technology focus areas: artificial intelligence and machine learning; high-performance computing;

biotechnology and genomics; and robotics, automation, and advanced manufacturing—just to name a few. The Technology Directorate would be led by a new Deputy Director and would have flexible personnel, program management, and awarding authorities, including those similar to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), allowing it focus on tangible, deadline-driven results.

An additional $10 billion, funded by the Department of Commerce, would create at least 10 regional technology hubs, awarding funds for initiatives focused on catalyzing R&D partnerships in areas that are not already leading centers of innovation. The legislation also envisions programs designed to accelerate technology transfer from the lab to the marketplace, including access to investment capital.

Bipartisan Support, Uncertain Future

What's next for the *Endless Frontiers Act*? While the legislation has bipartisan support, it's future remains uncertain. Not surprisingly, the coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted the congressional calendar with Congress focusing on COVID-19 relief and only a few other "must-pass" legislative items. Senators Schumer and Young argue that investments in technology and innovation, like those proposed in the *Endless Frontiers Act*, are exactly what's needed to address not only COVID-19, but also future domestic and global crises. They've indicated that the bill could be included as part of the *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA), contending that American leadership in science and technology is a matter of national defense.

While many university and scientific groups have applauded the bill's vision, other stakeholder groups have expressed concerns over the bill, fearing it would derail NSF's core mission of supporting fundamental research. Most agree the bill sends an important message—it's time for bold action to move the U.S. research enterprise forward.

The ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Office will continue to monitor the *Endless Frontiers Act* and keep Society members informed of its progress. To hear the latest updates on this and other science policy news, sign up for the Legislative Action Network: **www.agronomy.org/science-policy/get-involved/lan**, **www.crops.org/science-policy/get-involved/lan**, and **www.soils.org/science-policy/get-involved/lan**

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Back to issue

Back to home
