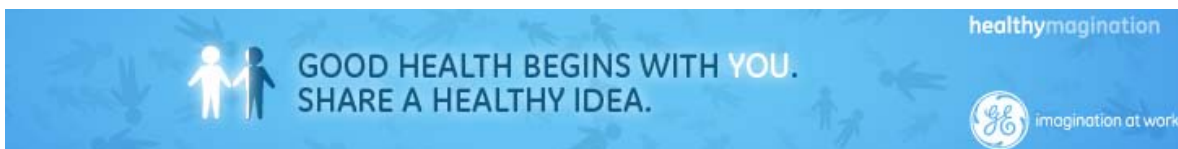




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# Darrell Issa's Cuts To 'Silly-Sounding' Research Are No Laughing Matter For Scientists

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NEW YORK -- Condoms, yoga and pot were among the subjects of research projects House Oversight Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) [proposed defunding](#) in amendments to the lower chamber's budget bill last week. The targeted line items were just the latest in a long series of government-funded programs used as talking points by deficit hawks -- programs that sound, on the surface, like objectionable or absurd uses of federal money.

The truth, say scientists whose funding was on the chopping block, is that their work is more promising than dismissive capsule summaries suggest.

Cherry-picking these sorts of appropriations is an art [perfected by](#) Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), but the spitballing appeal such talking points have for media gabmeisters makes them an easy political layup for any lawmaker focused on reductions in government spending.

Issa's desired cuts were no exception: They were quickly [picked up by Politico](#) and [the Wall Street Journal's Washington Wire](#), among other outlets. Even though his amendments failed to make it into the final bill, Issa took another shot at the same research programs on MSNBC and Fox News. "We were not able to get a study on the effects of malt liquor in combination with marijuana out of there," he told MSNBC's Norah O'Donnell on Friday, "as though we need to study whether or not that's bad."

The California Republican's other targets included a study examining men's skill with condom use, experiments on the interaction of marijuana-like substances with opioids, and research backed by the National Institutes of Health examining the impact of yoga on hot flashes in menopausal women. Both Politico and the Wall Street Journal referred to the projects as "silly-sounding" without offering responses from scientists.

Indeed, multiple scientists mentioned in those reports said in interviews with The Huffington Post that no other media outlets had reached out to them. One of those scientists, University of Illinois at Chicago professor Lisa M. Powell, said that the work she does investigating the potential impact of soda taxes on obesity is "not at all silly."

Powell alleged that her work was put under the gun because of "potential policy implications that may provide support for increasing taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. Indeed, industry is lobbying hard against any such taxes." In December, Issa [sent letters](#) to industry trade groups asking them which regulations they wanted him to target, and the American Beverage Association [applauded](#) the effort to strip her funding on its website, but Issa spokesman Kurt Bardella told HuffPost the industry did not suggest that cut.

Bardella said Issa's proposed cuts were designed to serve as part of "a broader conversation about how to spend taxpayer dollars." As for individual projects, he said, "Every single person that gets money cut says that their project is worthwhile. Governing is prioritizing."

Recipients of federal funding countered that it can be difficult to prioritize properly without a serious assessment of their projects. Lily Whiteman, a spokeswoman for the National Science Foundation, said neither Issa nor other media contacted the foundation about another of the chairman's suggested cuts, an NSF examination of whether video games can improve mental health among the elderly.

"The word 'videogame' makes it sound silly and for children," Whiteman said, arguing that the research could aid millions of Alzheimer's sufferers.

A spokeswoman for Wake Forest University, which is conducting the study on yoga's effects on menopause, wrote in an email that the school's research was "very important to the millions of menopausal women who suffer from constant loss of sleep and other negative quality of life issues due to menopausal hot flashes."

The spokesperson, Paula Faria, added that cutting off funding would force the university to fire staffers -- and since the work hasn't been analyzed yet, "all of the data we have collected, and the money spent, will have been wasted."

Most of the funding for the research involving marijuana and malt liquor has also already been spent, said R. Lorraine Collins, a psychologist and the associate dean for public health research at the State University of New York-Buffalo. Collins said her research, funded by NIH, does not simply study the effects of the substances in conjunction with one another -- she examines methods by which public health officials can limit such use.

"It would be a wonderful, wonderful thing if all you had to say to people was, you know, that's not a good idea," Collins said. "It doesn't work as an intervention or prevention strategy, at least not to my knowledge."

Most of Issa's targeted projects aren't new: they were also featured in reports Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) produced about "wasteful" stimulus funding in [2009](#) and [2010](#). Bardella, the Issa spokesman, said that in general, "we just went on the NIH website. It's the same thing we did last year when we struck funding for [studies on alcoholism in Thai prostitutes](#)."

For one scientist, Issa's amendment meant a third round of hostile political attention. Washington State University professor Michael Morgan's research on cannabinoid-opioid interaction, funded by NIH, was 75th on Coburn's list of 100 "wasteful" projects and subsequently [derided](#) as a "boondoggle" by Senate candidate Dino Rossi, who quipped, "This bill isn't going to stimulate anything other than sales of Cheetos."

No one from Coburn, Rossi, or Issa's staffs contacted Morgan about his research, the professor wrote in an email. "Given the way Coburn, Rossi, and Issa have characterized the project, I am pretty sure none of them have read the publicly available [abstract](#)," he wrote, noting that while Coburn claimed the experiment uses marijuana, it actually uses a synthetic substitute.

Here's how Morgan argued for his government subsidy:

The potential health benefit is huge. Millions of people suffer from chronic pain at a cost of over \$100 billion a year in the U.S. Many of these people do not receive adequate pain relief by taking opioids. We have found that injecting a rat with a cannabinoid will enhance the analgesic effect of morphine given a day later. There are no human studies on this, in part because physicians are afraid to give opioids and cannabinoids to a patient, but if this effect occurs in humans then one could imagine alternating the use of cannabinoids and opioids to provide better pain relief at lower doses. Both drugs are already used independently for the treatment of pain so it is not clear why studying combination therapy is a bad idea. The attacks I have dealt with over the past two years suggests that Republicans are very frightened by this idea, but my guess is their opinion would change if they or someone they knew was suffering from chronic pain.

He added that his research funding has covered salaries for three people, which he called "a pretty good use of stimulus funds."