



Draft COMPETES/NSF Bill Released in the Senate

July 28, 2014

Earlier this month, the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee released a draft of its [America COMPETES Reauthorization Act of 2014](#) for public input. The America COMPETES Act is bipartisan legislation originally enacted in 2007 and reauthorized in 2010 to revitalize the U.S. scientific enterprise by making critical investments in U.S. basic science agencies. These investments were intended to ensure the U.S.'s continued standing as the global leader in science and technology innovation. COMPETES serves as authorizing legislation for the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Science, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and federal STEM education programs.

The draft Senate bill is a major improvement over its House counterpart, the *Frontiers in Innovation, Research, Science and Technology Act*, or FIRST Act (H.R. 4186), which was reported out of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee in May. As [previously reported](#), the FIRST Act is of major concern to the research community for several reasons; particularly its intent to cut the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate at NSF by more than 40 percent and, more generally, for its lack of vision for the U.S. scientific enterprise.

Increased NSF Funding

Unlike the FIRST Act, the Senate draft would maintain current practice when it comes to funding NSF, which is to not provide specific authorization levels for NSF's individual research directorates. Instead, the Senate bill provides an authorization only for NSF's top-line budget and high level subaccounts. For fiscal year (FY) 2015, the Senate bill would authorize an NSF budget of \$7.65 billion, which if appropriated, would be an increase of more than 6.5 percent over the FY 2014 level. It also represents a 5 percent increase over the amount authorized for NSF in the FIRST Act. Further, while the FIRST Act would only authorize NSF for FY 2014 (the current fiscal year) and FY 2015, the Senate bill seeks a five-year authorization, with the NSF budget growing by more than 6.5 percent each year to a total of \$9.9 billion by FY 2019.

Support for Social, Behavioral and Economic Science

In addition to the positive proposed funding levels, the draft Senate bill maintains the Committee's support for all areas of science, placing specific emphasis on the social and behavioral sciences. It includes a number of examples of social science investments that have addressed societal challenges, including in medicine, policing, national defense, and disaster preparedness, and states that it is the sense of Congress that, "if the United States is to remain innovative and globally competitive, [NSF] must continue to meet its legislative mandate through... robust support for basic research across a wide range of science and engineering fields, including the social, behavioral, and economic sciences."

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Senate Commerce Committee Hearing

Prior to the release of the draft COMPETES bill, the Senate Commerce Committee held a hearing titled, "The Federal Research Portfolio: Capitalizing on Investments in R&D," to receive testimony on the value of investment in NSF and other federal science agencies. Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) noted during the hearing that "Congress has no business deciding which projects are worth federal funding," referring to recent Republican attacks on specific grants and adding that scientists and the peer review process should be trusted to make such decisions.

Witnesses included Dr. Vinton G. Cerf, Vice President and Chief Internet Evangelist at Google and member of the National Science Board; Ms. Mariette DiChristina, Editor in Chief and Senior Vice President for *Scientific American*; Dr. Neal F. Lane, Senior Fellow and professor of physics and astronomy at Rice University, and Co-Chair of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences Committee on New Models for U.S. Science and Technology Policy; and Dr. Stephen E. Fienberg, Maurice Falk University Professor of Statistics and Social Science at Carnegie Mellon University and member of the National Research Council Committee on Assessing the Value of Research in Advancing National Goals. Witnesses spoke about the federal government's unique role in supporting and sustaining R&D investments, particularly given that industry often shies away from funding basic science. In addition, they spoke of the importance of failure in research, noting that understanding the reason for failure can often be more valuable than positive results. Dr. Cerf explained that the Internet took 10 years of research, and failure, before becoming operational.

A webcast of the hearing and witness testimony can be found on the Committee's [website](#).

Looking Ahead

The outlook for further action on NSF reauthorization legislation this year remains unknown. The FIRST Act has not yet received a vote by the full House, although a number of noncontroversial components of the bill were stripped out and passed as standalone bills earlier this month (*STEM Education Act* [[H.R. 5031](#)], *Research and Development Efficiency Act* [[H.R. 5056](#)], and *International Science and Technology Cooperation Act of 2014* [[H.R. 5029](#)]). It is not yet clear if/when the Senate Commerce Committee will introduce its bill and mark it up. In addition, the House and Senate are preparing to leave town for their month-long August recess, and the November elections leave few remaining legislative days.

