

U.S. Lawmaker Proposes New Criteria for Choosing NSF Grants

By [Jeffrey Mervis](#) Apr. 28, 2013 , 3:48 PM



New criteria. Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) is drafting legislation that would require the NSF director to certify that research met a number of new criteria.

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

The new chair of the House of Representatives science committee has drafted a bill that, in effect, would replace peer review at the National Science Foundation (NSF) with a set of funding criteria chosen by Congress. For good measure, it would also set in motion a process to determine whether the same criteria should be adopted by every other federal science agency.

[The legislation](#), being worked up by Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX), represents the latest—and bluntest—attack on NSF by congressional Republicans seeking to halt what they believe is frivolous and wasteful research being funded in the social sciences. Last month, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) successfully attached language to a 2013 spending bill that prohibits NSF from funding any political science research for the rest of the fiscal year unless its director certifies that it pertains to economic development or national security. Smith's draft bill, called the "High Quality Research Act," would apply similar language to NSF's entire research portfolio across all the disciplines that it supports.

ScienceInsider has obtained a copy of the legislation, labeled "Discussion Draft" and dated 18 April, which has begun to circulate among members of Congress and science lobbyists. In effect, the proposed bill would force NSF to adopt three criteria in judging every grant. Specifically, the draft would require the NSF director to post on NSF's Web site, prior to any award, a declaration that certifies the research is:

- 1) "... in the interests of the United States to advance the national health, prosperity, or welfare, and to secure the national defense by promoting the progress of science;
- 2) "... the finest quality, is groundbreaking, and answers questions or solves problems that are of utmost importance to society at large; and

3) "... not duplicative of other research projects being funded by the Foundation or other Federal science agencies."

NSF's current guidelines ask reviewers to consider the "intellectual merit" of a proposed research project as well as its "broader impacts" on the scientific community and society.

Two weeks ago, Republicans on the science committee took to task both John Holdren, the president's science adviser, and Cora Marrett, the acting NSF director, [during hearings on President Barack Obama's proposed 2014 science budget](#). They read the titles of several grants, questioned the value of the research, and asked both administration officials to defend NSF's decision to fund the work.

On Thursday, [Smith sent a letter to Marrett](#) asking for more information on five recent NSF grants. In particular, he requested copies of the comments from each reviewer, as well as the notes of the NSF program officer managing the awards.

In his letter, a copy of which *ScienceInsider* obtained, Smith wrote: "I have concerns regarding some grants approved by the Foundation and how closely they adhere to NSF's 'intellectual merit' guideline." Today, Smith told *ScienceInsider* in a statement that "the proposals about which I have requested further information do not seem to meet the high standards of most NSF funded projects."

Smith's request to NSF didn't sit well with the top Democrat on the science committee, Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX). On Friday, [she sent a blistering missive to Smith](#) questioning his judgment and his motives.

"In the history of this committee, no chairman has ever put themselves forward as an expert in the science that underlies specific grant proposals funded by NSF," Johnson wrote in a letter obtained by *ScienceInsider*. "I have never seen a chairman decide to go after specific grants simply because the chairman does not believe them to be of high value."

In her letter, Johnson warns Smith that "the moment you compromise both the merit review process and the basic research mission of NSF is the moment you undo everything that has enabled NSF to contribute so profoundly to our national health, prosperity, and welfare." She asks him to "withdraw" his letter and offers to work with him "to identify a less destructive, but more effective, effort" to make sure NSF is meeting that mission.

Smith's bill would require NSF's oversight body, the National Science Board, to monitor the director's actions and issue a report in a year. It also asks Holdren's office to tell Congress how the principles laid down in the legislation "may be implemented in other Federal science agencies."