Bush Focuses on Science in State of the Union

During his State of the Union address on January 31, President Bush announced that science research and education funding will be high on his administration's agenda for 2006. President Bush discussed his American Competitiveness Initiative (ACI), which he asserted will encourage innovation throughout the economy and give American children a firm grounding in math and science education.

To implement the ACI, federal funding for critical research and development and education and innovation will be increased to $5.9 billion in FY 2007 and a total of $136 billion over ten years. Funding for basic research programs in the physical sciences would receive substantial increases and private sector investment would be encouraged to ensure that America will lead the world in opportunity and innovation for decades to come.

The focus of the ACI is to double investment in federal programs that support scientific research, such as the National Science Foundation, over ten years. This commitment would provide around $50 billion in new funding. The president also announced that he wants to make the federal research and development tax credit permanent and work with Congress to modernize the credit to make it more effective and efficient at encouraging private sector innovation. This is estimated to cost $86.4 billion over ten years.

Fortunately, for FY 2007, the NSF's geography program looks to be an immediate beneficiary of the ACI. The president's budget proposal, which was released on February 6, requests a 5.5 percent increase for the foundation's Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences (BCS) Division, which includes the geographical sciences. Specifically, BCS lists "Using a geographic framework for understanding social, political, and economic transformations" among its major activities for the coming year.

The ACI draws its inspiration from a series of bipartisan bills, which were introduced in Congress prior to the president's address. The bills, known as Protecting America's Competitive Edge (PACE), focus on science research and education funding. The education legislation would provide 25,000 new scholarships for students. The PACE bills, introduced by Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Pete Domenici (R-NM), and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), are expected to move through the committee stages very quickly because of the sponsors' placement on key panels and a wide range of bipartisan support.

The only problem, according to House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), is "Where do we get the money for all this?" With an already bloated deficit, budget specialists say times couldn't be worse for a new domestic program such as PACE or ACI. The answer may come in part from funding cuts in other agencies and programs. John Marburger, Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, acknowledged that this initiative does not provide increased funding for all federal research agencies. The National Institutes of Health and the National Aeronautic and Space Administration may be poised to take a hit in FY 2007.

NIH Opens Office Aimed at Strategic Investments

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), which has seen a huge influx of federal dollars in the last decade and ranks as the largest source of federal funds for university research, is opening a new office aimed at promoting cutting-edge science and allowing for nimbleness in agency investments. The Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI) will attempt to answer far reaching questions and deal with health issues that might not affect the nation or the world for years to come. OPASI will also aim to cover the cracks that fall between the twenty-seven NIH Institutes and Centers (ICs), so that no key area of health research is missed and to insure that cross-cutting research remains at the top of the agenda.

The office, which was formally launched with a September 28 federal notice, is still in its formative stages and NIH Director Elias Zerhouni has yet to name an interim head of OPASI. Zerhouni's office has already begun a nationwide search for a permanent OPASI director to lead and shape the office over the next several years. OPASI will get its operating budget from a common fund that all of the ICs will contribute to and the new office will identify investment opportunities based on proposals from individuals and groups both inside and out of the NIH structure. One goal of OPASI is to be as transparent as possible and there will be multiple opportunities for outside groups and stakeholders to provide input into the priority-setting process. The office certainly bears watching as it takes hold in the coming years.

Administration Proposes Cut for USGS in FY 2007

Under the president's budget proposal for the Department of the Interior, which was released on February 6, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) would receive $950.9 million, a cut of $19.7 million or two percent from the congressionally-enacted amount of $970.6 million for FY 2006. The decrease continues a recent trend under which the administration has attempted to rein in the survey's budget despite yearly boosts from congressional appropriators.

Within the USGS Geographic Research, Investigations, and Remote Sensing program, the land remote sensing account would receive a boost of $16 million, to a total of $61.8 million, to fund Landsat 8 development. According to a USGS press release, this continues the federal government's "thirty-year legacy of obtaining global earth observation data via Landsat missions." Meanwhile, geographic analysis and monitoring, the primary geography research account, would receive a slight boost of $155,000, to a total of $14.86 million.

The administration also proposes to move funding for Cooperative Topographic Mapping, which includes the National Map and many geographic information systems activities, from the survey's geography program to the Enterprise Information Activity, technically a new account under the control of the Geospatial Information Office. This move comes as the result of realignment decisions previously announced by USGS but it could face some scrutiny on Capitol Hill. We will keep you apprised of any developments.