Washington Monitor

No doubt, 2012 promises to be an exciting year for political observers, and the political geography of the Electoral College will be a dominant topic throughout this leap year. As I wish you all a Happy New Year, I look forward to covering key events for geographers as we move towards an important presidential election. But before Washington can turn its full attention to the election year, a number of key budget and fiscal issues, including some deeply affecting the science community, remain up in the air.

Supercommittee Failure: Now What?

As readers of this column are no doubt aware, the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction failed in its mandate to issue a recommendation by November 23, 2011 for at least $1.5 trillion in additional deficit reduction steps to be undertaken over a ten-year period. So where does this leave us?

The Supercommittee’s co-chairs, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Rep. Jeb Hensarling (R-TX), tried to put a positive spin on the situation, asserting that while they were “deeply disappointed” with the panel’s “inability to bridge significant differences, we end this process united in our belief that the nation’s fiscal crisis must be addressed and that we cannot leave it for the next generation to solve.”

The failure to reach an accord has triggered a provision in the Budget Control Act (the legislation passed in August during the debt debate that created the Supercommittee) that mandates $1.2 trillion in “automatic” cuts over the next decade. These cuts cannot come from Medicare and Social Security and they must be split 50-50 between “security” (Defense Department, as defined in the law) and domestic discretionary spending.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has indicated that the mandatory cuts “will tear a seam in the nation’s defense,” and several leading Republicans have declared their intent to seek a change in the funding formula. But President Obama promised to veto any effort to undo the triggered cuts, saying, “There will be no easy off ramps on this one.” Given the realities of divided government and the unwillingness of House Republicans to increase taxes, it seems highly improbable that the mandatory cuts will be undone or significantly revised.

So how will the cuts to non-defense spending affect federal research budgets? At this point, the likeliest outcome is for the trigger to be applied as an across-the-board (ATB) cut that would affect all federal accounts. This would equate to a 7.9 percent spending cut for most federal budgets. While that figure would not debilitating the National Science Foundation (NSF) and other research agencies, it would be a disappointment just a few years after legislation was passed that called for the doubling of the NSF budget.

Given the recently enacted Fiscal Year 2012 appropriation of $7.033 billion (an increase of $173.2 million or 2.5 percent) for the Foundation, an ATB cut would work out to about $555.6 million, which is certainly a significant and worrisome figure.

It is possible that an agreement could be reached to cut certain federal accounts at a higher rate, and under such a scenario, NSF and research funding would probably receive a reduced cut. But it is unlikely that an agreement would pass through the House without reductions to the Defense cuts – something many Congressional Democrats would strongly oppose.

OSTP Receives Severe Budget Cut

In related budget news, the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy (OSTP) received a significant cut for FY 2012 as part of the recently-enacted Commerce, Justice, Science (CJS) appropriations bill. The Office was funded at a level of $4.5 billion, which is $2.1 billion (32 percent) below its FY 2011 funding.

The cut is tied to an ongoing dispute between OSTP Director John Holdren and Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA), who chairs the House Appropriations CJS Subcommittee. Wolf had included language in OSTP’s FY 2011 appropriation preventing the Office from entering into certain agreements (including various technology transfers) with China. Holdren, nonetheless, went ahead with certain partnerships, relying on a formal opinion from the Justice Department that the appropriations language was a violation of the President’s constitutional authority to manage foreign diplomacy.

Wolf had originally proposed to cut the OSTP budget in half, but the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) urged the Senate to lessen the cut in their budget negotiations with the House.

EDF Endorses AAG Resolution

Significant support continues to roll in from all sectors for the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education.” The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) has become the latest organization to endorse the resolution. With a membership of over 700,000, EDF’s mission is “to preserve the natural systems on which all life depends. Guided by science, EDF designs and transforms markets to bring lasting solutions to the most serious environmental problems.”

EDF, which was founded in 1967 by scientists and environmental activists, is perhaps best known for its role in promoting a ban of the insecticide DDT. The group has also played a role in clean air and water efforts, endangered species protection, and many other leading environmental issues. We thank EDF for their support.

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