

ASCB Says No to Arbitrary Cuts

When it comes to deciding which popular federal program to cut, Congress hates to make decisions. In an effort to save themselves from having to make tough funding choices, last month members of the U.S. Senate tried several times to institute sweeping, across-the-board cuts to future federal budgets.

The ASCB and over 100 other advocacy organizations sent a letter to the members of the U.S. Senate opposing the across-the-board cuts. The letter said that arbitrary caps on spending “immeasurably harm those in America who rely on the federal government to provide basic and necessary services, particularly in times of economic hardship. For example, the U.S. Public Health Service—including NIH, CDC, HRSA, FDA, SAMHSA, AHRQ, and the Indian Health Service—is essential for improving health and health care through greater access, higher quality, lower costs, improved safety, and faster cures.” The across-the-board cuts would also apply to the U.S.

National Science Foundation.

The letter pointed out that despite the serious impact the cuts would have on individual federal programs, they would have little or no impact on the deficit or U.S. national debt. This is because discretionary programs only account for 1/8th of federal spending each year.

The U.S. Senate has voted on spending caps several times this year, and each time the effort has been defeated. Most recently, Senators Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Jeff Sessions (R-AL) spearheaded the effort to institute spending caps. Their amendment was defeated 56–40; U.S. Senate parliamentary rules require 60 votes to approve these amendments. Sen. Mark Pryor (D-AR) and Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) each offered alternative amendments and each was defeated. The Inhofe amendment would have limited spending caps to nonsecurity-related federal spending. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

Springtime in Washington, DC

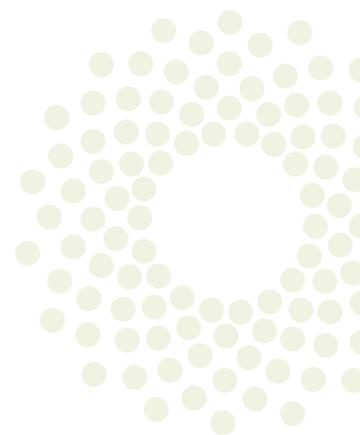
The National Cherry Blossom Festival, high school trips to Washington, DC, and congressional letters of support for the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) are all longstanding spring traditions in Washington, DC. The annual Cherry Blossom Festival shows off the city at its most beautiful to tens of thousands of U.S. taxpayers and others. Class trips to Washington, DC, often serve to plant the seeds for future political careers. Congressional letters of support for the NIH mark the start of the annual process to provide federal funding for biology research around the U.S.

This year, 99 Democrats and 10 Republicans in the House of Representatives asked the House Appropriations Committee for an increase in funding for the NIH. Unlike past years, however, the two parties sent separate letters and each group asked the committee for different increases. The number of Democrats signing their letter represented a slight net loss from 2009: 20 members of Congress who signed last year didn't sign this year, but 15 members who

did not sign last year signed this year. Support among Republican members of the House decreased slightly too.

The decrease in the number of Representatives signing letters of support should not be viewed as a direct loss of support for the NIH within the halls of Congress. Instead, the decrease is due, in part, to a more partisan and bitter atmosphere on Capitol Hill than in recent memory. Issues such as healthcare reform, the size of the federal deficit, and “pork barrel” spending (funding for a specific project for a Member of Congress' home district) have made it almost impossible to get anything done in Congress. At the same time that the authors of the NIH support letters sought signers, a partisan fracas broke out about the use of earmarks for pork barrel spending projects. Representatives facing difficult reelection campaigns, due in part to their support of healthcare reform, have also expressed concern about asking for large increases in federal spending. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson



Cells in Space

It's now official: stem cell research is ubiquitous. In 2001, soon after U.S. President George W. Bush announced his limited stem cell policy, the *Doonesbury* comic strip spent a week discussing the issue: The character Duke sold stem cells from a beer cooler in a Minnesota bar. Now, NASA has sent stem cells up on the space shuttle in one of three life science experiments.

When the space shuttle *Discovery* lifted off in April from Kennedy Space Center in Florida, it brought three life science experiments to the International Space Station (ISS). NASA hopes to gain a better understanding of how extended space travel affects cell growth and how cells fight infections.

The Stem Cell Regeneration experiment will study the ability of mouse embryonic stem cells

to differentiate in microgravity. In a NASA press release announcing the life science experiments, principal investigator Eduardo Almeida said, "We are trying to get to the root cause of tissue degeneration in space. We hope our research will help find preventative measures to address adult stem cell health in microgravity."

The second experiment, STL – Immune, will examine the effects of microgravity on intestinal cellular responses, before and after infection with *Salmonella*. The third experiment will study how microgravity influences the immune system of mouse models.

For information about science conducted aboard the ISS, go to www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/science. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

Have You Received American Recovery & Reinvestment (ARRA) Funds?

Fight This Kind of Misinformation!

ARRA opponents insist it's a failure...

"The stimulus created jobs...and the moon landing was faked"

—Illinois Republican Party press release

"'Stimulus' is Not Creating Jobs"

—Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) Blog post

"'Stimulus' cash doesn't create local jobs"

—*Washington Times*

...and that the NIH is misspending some ARRA funding.

Act Now!

Tell your elected officials and local newspapers about how NIH ARRA funding is helping your community economically to improve human health.

It's Easy!

Go to www.ascb.org/ARRA to tell your story.