First, the Good News...

Three months after the start of the 2012 federal fiscal year, Congress completed the FY12 federal budget. During most of that time, science advocates held their breaths, fearing bad news for federally funded scientific research.

In the end, the FY12 budget for the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) saw a slight increase from the FY11 budget. The FY12 program budget for the NIH will be $30.689 billion, which is $299 million or 0.8% more than FY11. Earlier in the fall, Congress passed the FY12 budget for the National Science Foundation (NSF). The FY12 NSF budget will increase by $173 million to $7 billion.

Along with the slight funding increase for the NIH, the Committee Report accompanying the budget includes several policy directives for the NIH. The report directs the NIH to "ensure its policies continue to support a robust extramural community and make certain sufficient research resources are available to the more than 300,000 NIH-supported scientists at over 3,100 institutions across the country."

The NIH budget also includes language that eliminates the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR) and creates the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). This proposal has been strongly supported by NIH Director Francis Collins. In approving the elimination of the NCRR and the creation of NCATS, Congress issued a verbal slap on the wrist to the NIH for the way the proposal was requested. The report says that NIH's failure to request funding for the restructuring or provide Congress with details about the consolidation "caused unnecessary uncertainly about the proposal and contributed to the impression that it was being rushed."

The NIH funding bill also requires that funding for extramural research remain at 90% of the NIH budget and that the percentage of NIH funds used for basic research be maintained. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

Now, the Bad News...

A new term entered the American political lexicon in 2011: Super Committee. The committee, created in August 2011 by the U.S. Congress as a way to resolve the government-wide debt limit deadlock, began with a great deal of hope but concluded its work as the newest example of partisan gridlock in Washington, DC.

The Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, the official name of the Super Committee, was charged with finding at least $1.2 trillion in cuts to the FY13 U.S. federal budget. Under its charter, if the committee could not reach agreement, $1.2 trillion in cuts would be made equally across the federal budget. Such an outcome was originally designed to be painful enough to force the members of the Super Committee to reach agreement. In the end, it became a viable option for committee members unwilling to make hard choices.

What will the across-the-board cuts mean for federal science programs in 2013? In a letter to the Super Committee, Rep. Norm Dicks (D-CA), the senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, estimates that the failure of the Super Committee to reach agreement will mean a 7.8% cut for federal agencies like the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

According to Dicks, the NIH will be forced to award between 2,500 and 2,700 fewer research grants. Dicks also estimates that the NSF budget will be decreased by $530 million, including $430 million from research grants and $67 million from STEM education programs. Estimates are that the NSF will issue 1,500 fewer grants than in FY11, thus supporting 18,000 fewer researchers. The enormity of the cuts to scientific programs is just a snapshot of the impact on the rest of the federal budget.

Things are rarely ever over in Washington, especially in an election year. Congress always seems to be able to find its way out of a jam. This time, however, Congress may have dug itself too deep a hole.

To read the complete letter from Rep. Dicks to the Super Committee, go to http://tinyurl.com/6t6r6ex. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

ASCB Responds to White House Call

How can life science discoveries help the U.S. economy? Last fall, President Obama announced plans to develop a National Bioeconomy Blueprint detailing steps his administration would take to harness biological research discoveries and innovations to address health, food, energy, and environmental challenges facing the United States. As part of the development of the plan, the administration asked interested groups to comment on a series of questions.

In response, the ASCB supplied the White House with its views on a number of issues. Members of the ASCB Public Policy and Education Committees drafted a statement in conjunction with the ASCB Executive Committee. Most importantly, the ASCB called for sustainable and dependable growth in funding for biological research. The ASCB's comments said, "The last decade has seen boom and bust funding cycles that have led to irresponsible growth in infrastructure followed by underfunding of the science…ultimately undermining the investment in infrastructure." In particular, the ASCB called for the federal government to commit to a future funding growth rate of "inflation plus 2%" for biological research.

The ASCB also recommended that efforts to accelerate bioeconomy-related research should include a focus on the development of technologies for assembling gene-length DNA segments to enhance structure/function studies of proteins and RNAs.

The comments by the Society also included a recommendation that graduate programs provide students with exposure to the various career opportunities available to researchers beyond the academic lab and the suggestion that there should be a more active effort to involve students in industry internships.

To read the complete statement by the ASCB, go to www.ascb.org/files/ASCB-Comments-on-Bioeconomy-Blueprint.pdf.

For more information about the National Bioeconomy Blueprint, go www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/10/12/building-bioeconomy. ■

—Kevin M. Wilson

2012 Capitol Hill Days… MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD!

Be an advocate for sound science policy on Capitol Hill by attending a Capitol Hill Day sponsored by the ASCB and the Congressional Liaison Committee of the Coalition for the Life Sciences (CLS).

To sign up to participate or for more information visit: www.coalitionforlifesciences.org.

2012 CLS Hill Days are March 28 and September 12.