

House science committee delves into NSF budget request for FY 2019

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The House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology held a hearing to review the fiscal year (FY) 2019 budget request and funding priorities for the National Science Foundation (NSF). Although the Administration initially proposed a \$2.2 billion cut to NSF's budget compared to FY 2017, an addendum released with the budget request provided flat funding for the agency at approximately \$7.47 billion. While the FY 2019 budget request would sustain the same FY 2017 funding level for the agency overall, it proposes a different distribution of funds for programs within NSF. This would include, for instance, large increases to support NSF's 10 Big Ideas, new convergent interdisciplinary research initiatives, and the Directorate for Geosciences (GEO), while simultaneously proposing high, double-digit percentage cuts to Major Research Equipment and Facilities Construction and Social Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) programs.

Throughout the hearing, members of Congress from both parties as well as experts on the witness panel expressed concern that the United States would eventually be surpassed by China as the top global technological innovator, referring to recent findings of the NSF Science and Engineering Indicators 2018 report released in January this year. According to the report, China's research and development (R&D) expenditures have been increasing on average 18 percent annually since 2000, which is substantially higher than the United States' 4 percent annual increase over the same time frame. If current trends continue, predictions estimate that China will surpass the United States' total R&D investment sometime this year.

Many Democratic committee members also aired their concerns regarding real dollar value devaluation inherent in flat funding, which does not reflect inflation over time. However, several Republicans on the committee argued that the flat-level budget request for FY 2019 would still allow for "frivolous" spending by the agency. Committee Chairman Lamar Smith (R-TX-21) challenged the validity of certain NSF project grants, particularly criticizing those associated with SBE, and pinpointed several projects that he believes do not truly serve national interests. In response, NSF Director France Córdova and National Science Board (NSB) Chair Maria Zuber pointed out the rigor of NSF's merit-based grant vetting process and highlighted examples of nationally important SBE projects, including active research into the opioid epidemic and facial recognition software, in addition to other national achievements such as the Physics Nobel Prize winning discovery of gravitational waves, which came as a result of forty years of NSF-funded research.

Sources: Eos, National Science Foundation, U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, White House
