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On October 17, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) introduced the BASIC Research Act (S.1973), a bill that would fundamentally change how the federal government reviews research grant proposals. The bill seeks to make several changes to peer review processes and broaden public access requirements for grant applications and research results. The following day, Senator Paul convened a hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management.

The hearing titled “Broken Beakers: Federal Support for Research” featured testimony from three expert witnesses who addressed federal investments in research and the role of science in growing the economy, national security, and well-being of American society. Rebecca Cunningham, an Associate Vice President for Research and Professor at the University of Michigan, provided several examples of the benefits from federal funding in basic scientific research. Brian Nosek, Executive Director of the Center for Open Science and Professor at the University of Virginia, suggested that promoting a culture of transparency and reproducibility, by shifting the incentive for researchers, will improve the speed and efficiency of scientific discovery. Conversely, Adjunct Scholar Terence Kealey of the Cato Institute argued that there is no evidence indicating that the expansion of federal funding of science since World War II has substantially contributed to the U.S. economy.

The BASIC Research Act would add two new representatives to every federal panel that reviews grant applications; one representative would be an expert in a field unrelated to the research being proposed, while the other would be a taxpayer advocate for research. Applicants would not be allowed to provide recommendations as to who should or should not participate on their grant review panel. The proposed legislation would also call for all federal grant applications to be made public.

The BASIC Research Act is similar in nature to Representative Lamar Smith’s (R-TX-21) HONEST Act (H.R.1430), which passed the House on March 29. The HONEST Act amends the Environmental Research, Development, and Demonstration Authorization Act of 1978 (H.R.11302) to prohibit the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from proposing, finalizing, or disseminating regulations unless all scientific and technical information to support such regulations is the best available science and is made publicly available for independent analysis and reproduction of results. The HONEST Act directs the EPA to issue guidance based solely on studies whose methods, materials, and data are open and accessible. This aspect is especially contentious in the scientific community because researchers typically keep data private before they publish their research.

Sources: American Institute of Physics, Library of Congress, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
