

UNITED STATES

Science coalition demands protection of research funding

Brendan O'Malley 09 April 2019

The Science Coalition*, comprising more than 50 leading private and public research universities in the United States, has urged Congress to protect funding for the “critically important” National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

It has warned that core federal research agencies face a US\$5 billion cut in funding and NIST’s budget would be cut by US\$88 million next year under sequestration cuts.

The latter are a form of across-the-board cuts imposed by government if Congress enacts legislation on spending that exceeds the federal government’s hard cap on funding within broad categories of spending.

The Science Coalition’s warning came in response to the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology’s hearing on the NIST fiscal year 2020 budget.

“NIST is an integral partner for America’s research universities in driving innovation, promoting scientific advancements, training the next generation of STEM leaders, and securing our nation’s role as a global technological leader,” the Science Coalition said.

“Looming sequestration cuts would reduce this small – but critically important – agency’s budget by US\$88 million next year. It is for these reasons that we are sounding the alarm now.”

The coalition urged Congress and the administration to raise the caps no later than 1 October to prevent NIST and other federal research agencies from being “impacted needlessly”.

The coalition recently joined a call on House and Senate appropriation leaders to increase funding for NIST’s Scientific and Technical Research and Services programmes. The letter also called on congressional leaders to fully fund US\$80 million for quantum science and technology activities at NIST, authorised in the bipartisan National Quantum Initiative Act.

The Science Coalition said an expected 9% post-sequester cut for non-defence discretionary spending and an 11% cut for defence basic research spending – not adjusting for inflation – would account for more than \$US5.1 billion in **cuts to other federal research agencies**, comprising:

- Department of Energy, Office of Science: US\$593 million
- Department of Defense, Basic Research: US\$278 million
- National Institutes of Health: US\$3.5 billion
- National Science Foundation: US\$726 million.

The coalition said: “Congress and the administration must act by 1 October 2019 to avoid across-the-board spending reductions to defence and non-defence discretionary spending. The sooner they reach a deal, the better it is for research agencies and their employees, as well as America’s research universities.

“Failure to reach an agreement could have serious implications for federal investment in scientific innovations and life-changing technologies. Decreased funding has a very real impact for regional economies supported by these resources.”

Public backs research spending

A nationwide poll conducted by the Science Coalition and released in December, which focused on Americans’ perceptions of federally-funded research, found that the American public overwhelmingly supports federal investment in fundamental research, and a majority of voters believe scientific investment should increase.

The poll found that nearly all Americans – regardless of political affiliation – believe that it is important for the US to be the global leader in scientific research and technology.

Further, eight in every 10 voters surveyed approve of the federal government using taxpayer funds to invest in scientific research. A majority of voters (60%) support investing more federal dollars in scientific research.

Anna Quider, president of the Science Coalition and director of federal relations at Northern Illinois University, said in December: “Fundamental research plays a vital role in our nation’s success. These results show that the American people place a high value on this type of science, and believe the federal government has a responsibility to promote the future of American innovation.”

She said that in the previous year, Congress funded fundamental research at the **highest level in 17 years**.

“It is imperative to keep up that momentum, and the overwhelming majority of Americans agree.”

** The Science Coalition is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation of more than 50 of the USA’s leading public and private research universities. It is dedicated to sustaining the US federal government’s investment in basic scientific research as a means to stimulate the economy, spur innovation and drive America’s global competitiveness.*

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