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House Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing on DOE Office of Science

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The Department of Energy's Office of Science "*is one of our bill's top priorities and always has been*" said House Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ) at a March 5 hearing. Frelinghuysen addressed his remarks to the hearing's sole witness, Office of Science Director William Brinkman, who appeared before the subcommittee to discuss the programs, plans and priorities of the Office of Science (SC).

This was a relatively friendly hearing, lacking the criticism heard during a recent National Nuclear Security Administration [hearing \(http://www.aip.org/fyi/2013/033.html\)](http://www.aip.org/fyi/2013/033.html) when there was much discussion about project management. A major concern was, as expected, future funding. While an agreement is being developed to keep flat funding in place for the remainder of this fiscal year, there are still a number of obstacles that must be cleared before March 27. If this legislation is passed, after accounting for mandated sequestration funding reductions, the SC budget will be just below that for FY 2009.

Frelinghuysen spoke about a future of flat or slightly declining budgets. Optimistic talk about a doubling of the SC budget is no longer heard. It is not known when the Administration's FY 2014 budget request will be sent to Congress. The likely timeframe is late March or early April, with Frelinghuysen saying every day of delay makes it more likely that FY 2014 funding will be provided by another flat-funding continuing resolution.

The call to make difficult choices is an often heard message in congressional hearings, but the need to do so now seems particularly appropriate. Frelinghuysen repeatedly spoke of this, mentioning SC's physics programs by name. There was considerable discussion about the trade-offs that have to be made about programs and facilities, for instance, supported by Nuclear Physics, with Brinkman telling the subcommittee "we clearly are not going to keep all of the programs up and running." Brinkman also spoke of other projects that have been sidelined such as the Next Generation Light Source at Berkeley and a second target station at the Spallation Neutron Source at Oak Ridge. SC staff has spent considerable time developing five or six ten-year budget scenarios, with Brinkman later adding "some things went away."

When Frelinghuysen asked what are the greatest scientific opportunities for SC during a time of flat or declining budgets, Brinkman first identified materials and light sources, citing the x-ray free-electron laser. That was followed by strong U.S. participation in ITER and clean energy. Also mentioned was maintaining a balance in SC's support of physics programs, with Brinkman saying "We think clean energy is an extremely important part of our mission, but we also have the mission of worrying about high energy physics, nuclear physics and fusion physics." Balance came up again later in the hearing. The first instance was when Brinkman declared that SC program support had tilted too heavily in favor of energy research. The second time was during a discussion with Frelinghuysen about ITER and the domestic fusion program, with Brinkman saying "I think we need a stronger domestic program."

Another major topic of discussion that was first raised by Ranking Member Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) was how SC research can be used in the development of technologies and subsequent economic growth. She was particularly interested in how the national laboratories reach out to places that do not have such facilities. Rep. Peter Visclosky (D-IN) focused on laboratory and industrial collaborations during his questioning of Brinkman, and said at one point, "I don't get a sense of urgency here."

Other topics raised during this hearing included advanced computing, progress in U-233 disposition at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the status of MIT's fusion reactor ("basically on hold" said Brinkman), cybersecurity threats, Energy Frontier Research Centers and hubs, climate change research, battery technologies, neutron facilities, the continued use of multi-year awards, bioenergy, and U.S. participation in large international efforts. About the last, Brinkman told the subcommittee that other countries are "very reluctant to work with us" because of funding instability.

Throughout this hearing, subcommittee members repeatedly demonstrated considerable knowledge in, and sophistication about, the programs of the Office of Science. Concern was also expressed about the impact that mandatory budget cuts will have on these programs, a topic that Brinkman discussed at some length in his written testimony. Excerpts from this testimony will appear in FYI #38.

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