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Skeptical Appropriators Question FY 2013 DOE Office of Science Budget Request

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Yesterday's hearing of the House Energy and Water Development Appropriations' Subcommittee on the Department of Energy's FY 2013 request for the Office of Science had a mixed outcome. While the subcommittee has traditionally been a strong supporter of the Office of Science, with Members reaffirming their support at this hearing, they raised many questions about the formulation and composition of the budget request.

Questions about, and at times outright hostility to, an administration's proposal to reduce or terminate program funding are to be expected at any congressional hearing. Examples this year include NASA's requested increase in funding for the James Webb Space Telescope and a reduction in funding for the Planetary Sciences program. Similar sentiments were expressed at a hearing of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee at which Energy Secretary Steven Chu testified on the FY 2013 DOE budget request.

A strong undercurrent of skepticism ran through yesterday's afternoon hearing before the appropriators. Subcommittee Chairman Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ) opened the hearing by telling Office of Science Director William Brinkman that he (Frelinghuysen) was "acutely aware of the importance of your mission" and how the subcommittee "fought hard" to increase the Office of Science budget for this fiscal year. Frelinghuysen spoke of the goal of doubling the budget, and how "that plan was simply not achievable" because of budget constraints. Expressing his appreciation of DOE's recognition of this new fiscal reality in its [budget request \(http://www.aip.org/fyi/2012/021.html?source=email\)](http://www.aip.org/fyi/2012/021.html?source=email), Frelinghuysen said the subcommittee had questions about the details of the FY 2013 request.

Ranking Minority Member Peter Visclosky (D-IN) was more reserved in his opening comments. He also talked about funding constraints, his concern that the request for infrastructure spending did not reflect these constraints, and the possible duplication of effort by ARPA-E, the Energy Innovation Hubs, and the Energy Frontier Research Centers.

In his opening testimony, Brinkman assured the subcommittee that "choices were made with extreme care" in the formulation of the request. Those choices and future program strategies, rather than the overall budget request, were the focus of this hearing.

In his first round of questions, Frelinghuysen asked about specific details of the request. He said the requested 6.6 percent increase in the Basic Energy Sciences program appeared to be offset by proposed funding reductions for facilities such as the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider and the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams. Brinkman said "the Administration's highest priority is clean energy," and acknowledged that the FY 2013 request for the Nuclear Physics program was not sufficient. He said a funding strategy would be formulated in the coming year. Frelinghuysen wondered why a strategy was not being developed this year.

Frelinghuysen also asked a series of questions about the requested decline in funding for domestic fusion facilities, and what would be a less than planned contribution for ITER. "Fusion sort of comes out as a loser here," he commented. Brinkman admitted that the Fusion Energy Sciences program would not receive as much money as desired, again speaking of "very hard decisions" about proposed funding for various facilities. Frelinghuysen wanted to know about the impact of the United States failing to provide all of its scheduled FY 2013 ITER contribution. "That's a problem we are working right now," Brinkman replied, adding "we intend to fulfill our [total] obligation." In concluding his remarks to Frelinghuysen, Brinkman acknowledged "we are taking some risk here."

Visclosky was skeptical about many aspects of the request. He wanted to know, as did Frelinghuysen later in the hearing, what specific activities in the FY 2013 Office of Science request would lead to an eventual support of manufacturing. Drilling down to different program line items, he questioned the rationale for a series of "notional" increases (as described by Brinkman) since they were all around \$2 million. When told that a competition would actually determine how that money was utilized, Visclosky replied "I find the answer very unsatisfactory."

Visclosky and Rep. John Olver (D-MA) asked about how appropriated funding was being used for infrastructure modernization at several DOE facilities, with Visclosky questioning why Congress had not been informed about the cancellation of a project. Rep. Steve Womack (R-AR) inquired about the Office of Science's support for exascale computing, which was the subject of questions from other appropriators.

In another round of questions, Olver pressed Brinkman about fusion for clean energy production. Olver spoke of how reduced funding for domestic programs would impact fusion research at General Atomics, MIT, and Princeton. "ITER is going to eat our whole domestic program," he declared. Brinkman sought to assure Olver that additional money would be found in coming years. In concluding his remarks, Brinkman predicted the utilization of fusion would not be realized for 50 years.

Visclosky asked about the status of the Long Baseline Neutrino Experiment following the decision that the National Science Foundation will not participate in the program. Brinkman praised a report that the high energy physics community had developed, but said it had "a very high price." "I don't see us as being able to do that specific experiment" he testified, saying that the FY 2013 request would enable DOE to continue pumping water from the Homestake Gold Mine and to conduct two smaller experiments.

Toward the end of the hearing Frelinghuysen predicted that "additional money for any program is going to be exceedingly difficult to come by." His observation, and persistent questions about how money was allocated in the FY 2013 budget request, characterize the outcome of yesterday's hearing as a yellow caution light.

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