

# Researchers welcome Obama's emphasis on science

March 5 2009, By Malcolm Garcia

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Valentino Stella had not expected President Barack Obama to mention science in his inaugural address. But when he promised to "restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health-care's quality and lower its cost," Stella, like other area researchers, took notice.

"I was pleasantly surprised the way it floated up to the surface, a very positive development," said Stella, distinguished professor of pharmaceutical chemistry at the University of Kansas. "I hope people realize it's fun to be a scientist. It's cool to be smart. That's more important than science getting promoted. That's the trickle down."

Weeks into his presidency, Obama has moved on several fronts emphasizing scientific research. But it remains to be seen whether the boost to science lives past campaign promises and the \$787 billion stimulus bill signed into law.

The stimulus package puts the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy and the DOE Office of Science on track to double their budgets in the next seven to 10 years.

The bill also provides billions of dollars for infrastructure improvement at universities and national laboratories.

Potentially, the stimulus bill could have a favorable impact on budgets for basic and applied research, which have been declining since 2004.

But with research mainly made up of multiyear projects, how funding will be sustained remains a key question.

"If you receive funding for a three-year grant, what happens in the fourth year when the money is no longer there?" said Lynda Bonewald, director of the Bone Biology Research Program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "You let people go."

Not far from Bonewald's office, doctoral student Jennifer Melander and her colleagues spent a recent day researching a bone stabilizer that would be applied to fractures by injecting it onto the bone. Melander hopes funding continues to complete the research.

"It has been hard to get funding," she said. "There hasn't been a lot of money, and without money you can't do anything. For a young researcher getting your foot in the door, you need funding. Now that may change."

Obama's economic recovery plan contains billions for the National Institutes of Health. Funding for the NIH doubled in the Bush administration's first term but inflation and rising costs have effectively reduced its purchasing power.

"We don't know how this funding will benefit science in the long term," said Jack Schultz, director of the Bond Life Sciences Center at the University of Missouri in Columbia. "A lot of what we get out of science takes time to develop."

Schultz said scientific research has a "curious" relationship with public policy.

"Science is often called in when it's needed and ignored when it's not," he said. "Science is a way of gathering information and drawing

conclusions. It's an approach to solving problems useful for all decision making whether we like what it tells us or not."

The American Association for the Advancement of Science lauded Obama's selection of Harvard physicist John Holdren and marine biologist Jane Lubchenco to top science posts.

Holdren and Lubchenco are leading experts on climate change who have advocated forceful government response.

"I think we're entering an age where the stature of science will be restored," said Alan Leshner, the association's CEO. "Every major issue has a scientific component to it. Technology is at the heart of many of our national problems. Science won't drive policy, but it can inform policy."

At KU, Stella's lab contracts with the National Cancer Institute to work on anti-cancer drugs. The lab has produced seven to eight pharmaceutical products now on the market.

At 62, Stella's main concern these days is for young researchers to get the right kind of mentoring and support.

"The pressure now is on young scientists to be successful," Stella said. "To have a real operational system you've got to raise at least a quarter of a million dollars. You have to be entrepreneurs as well as scientists."

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