

Obama vows return to US science prominence (Update)

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President Barack Obama pledged Monday to return the United States to a "high water mark" of scientific achievement, announcing a goal to commit three percent of GDP to research and development.

Obama laid out a deck of initiatives in a speech at the National Academy of Sciences, where he vowed to implement what he described as the largest-ever US investment in scientific research and a dramatic reversal of the ideology-driven policies of his predecessor George W. Bush.

The clarion call for the country to regain its position as the world leader in scientific research and innovation came as the Obama administration faced its first major global health crisis with a deadly swine flu outbreak in Mexico and the United States that threatens to burst into a pandemic.

"At such a difficult moment, there are those who say we cannot afford to invest in science, that support for research is somehow a luxury at moments defined by necessities," Obama told hundreds of scientists, researchers and educators.

"I fundamentally disagree. Science is more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, our environment and our quality of life than it has ever been."

Citing a plunge in federal funding of physical sciences over the past 25 years, Obama warned that US achievement, particularly science and math study, dramatically lagged in the late 20th century -- and threatened

to fall even further behind other rapidly advancing nations.

"I believe it is not in our American character to follow, but to lead. And it is time for us to lead once again," he said.

Obama also declared a need to end the politicization of scientific research, a charge he has leveled at the Bush administration.

"We are restoring science to its rightful place," he said. "Under my administration, the days of science taking a back seat to ideology are over."

Obama pointed to the US goal set in the 1950s to reach space and its commitment to leading scientific innovation after the Soviet Union shocked the world by launching its Sputnik 1 satellite into space in 1957.

"That was the high water mark of America's investment in research and development. Since then our investments have steadily declined as a share of our national income," he said.

But Obama set a goal of devoting more than three percent of US gross domestic product (GDP) to research and development.

"We will not just meet, but we will exceed the level achieved at the height of the space race through policies that invest in basic and applied research, create new incentives for private innovation, promote breakthroughs in energy and medicine, and improve education in math and science," he said.

As part of his massive 787-billion-dollar stimulus bill, Obama has committed 21.5 billion dollars for research and development, and his 2010 budget includes another 75 billion to make research and experimentation tax credits permanent.

In his first months in office, Obama began peeling back some key Bush science policies, including the decision to limit federal funding for embryonic stem cell research despite pleas by many scientists who believe it offers promise in fighting degenerative diseases.

Obama has also expressed deep concern over Bush's position on global warming, including his failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, and the president pulled no punches Monday.

"We have watched as scientific integrity has been undermined and scientific research politicized in an effort to advance predetermined ideological agendas," Obama said.

"We know that our country is better than this."

Among Obama's commitments are doubling the budget of the National Science Foundation, which funds academic research, the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the Department of Energy's Office of Science.

He also outlined a five-billion-dollar "Race To The Top" fund to encourage states to improve the quality and quantity of math and science teachers.

Obama announced the launch of the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Energy, or ARPA-E, a 400-million-dollar initiative dedicated to "high-risk, high-reward research."

Obama touched on his recovery plan that includes investing 150 billion dollars over the next decade on renewable energy sources.

He also put forward his President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, a group of 20 scientists and engineers Obama said would

advise him on "national strategies to nurture and sustain a culture of scientific innovation."

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