

Billion dollar boost for US science, health research?

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Health and science research would get a boost under the 2012 budget proposed Monday by US President Barack Obama, even though the Republican-controlled Congress aims to trim such spending.

Health and science research would get a billion-dollar boost under the 2012 budget proposed Monday by US President Barack Obama, including a major new project to speed lab advances into cures.

The increase for the National Institutes of Health stood out amid the overall \$3.7 trillion budget plan that would slash \$90 billion in spending in 2012 and \$1.1 trillion over the next 10 years.

But it faces hefty opposition from Republican lawmakers. They aim to trim a billion dollars from the world's largest public research institute as part of other cuts to science and research, which they say are necessary

as America faces a \$1.65 trillion deficit this year alone.

Leaders of the US government's major health centers, well aware that the budget faces a hostile Congress, sought to frame the Obama plan as a way of doing more with less.

"New frontiers have the promise to unlock revolutionary treatments and cures from diseases ranging from Alzheimer's to cancer to autism," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

"Our budget will allow the world's leading scientists to pursue these discoveries while keeping America at the forefront of biomedical research."

Sebelius said that despite the 3.4% hike for NIH, other spending cuts in government agencies resulted in an across-the-board budget that was "slightly below 2010" levels.

"We have to figure out a way that existing resources actually not only accomplish the earlier missions but also the new missions that have been given to us over the past few years," she told reporters.

Obama's budget would also raise by 13% the annual budget for the National Science Foundation, bringing it from \$6.9 billion to \$7.8 billion, and trim the Centers for Disease Control by 8.8%, to \$5.8 billion.

CDC chief Thomas Frieden said his agency's budget retooling was "complex" and included new programs toward HIV/AIDS prevention in the United States and global polio eradication as well as decreases in environmental and occupational health.

Those adjustments, together with some internal restructuring, leave the

entire CDC at "about level" with its 2010 spending, he said.

NIH director Francis Collins said his agency will refocus its efforts to bring laboratory discoveries more quickly to patients through a new institution called the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, which has been estimated at around a billion dollars.

"There is a great deluge of opportunities right now in basic scientific discoveries pointing us toward new potential therapeutics and the opportunity to have a center that focuses on that has been an idea that many people embrace both in the administration and both parties," Collins said.

"This is going to be a new arrival on the NIH stage we hope by October," he said.

Another new effort is the Cures Acceleration Network, a \$100 million plan to speed drug development that is included in the budget for the first time.

Obama's 2011 budget request was never enacted, and the US government has been funded since 2010 by stop-gap spending measures.

A new one is needed by March 4, which Republicans hope will total \$100 billion in spending cuts over Obama's 2011 proposal.

Late last week, the House Appropriations Committee released its plan for the 2011 fiscal year, including the billion dollar cut for NIH as well as a \$1.6 billion cut from the Environmental Protection Agency and \$370 million from NASA.

"While making these cuts is hard, we have a unique opportunity to right our fiscal ship," said chairman Hal Rogers.

Jon Retzlaff, director of science policy at the American Association for Cancer Research, said many researchers are worried about the possibility that NIH could be flat-funded by not receiving the billion dollar boost Obama wants.

"There is no question if there are not new dollars available it is very difficult to begin any kind of new program or even to emphasize certain programs," Retzlaff told AFP.

"It is just concerning when there is so much momentum in the field right now and so many exciting discoveries being made practically every day to think that we are going to slow down this process."

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