

House Panel Backs Cuts for Fusion, Solar Energy

By Dan Morgan
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A House Appropriations subcommittee yesterday proposed deep reductions in 1996 federal spending on fusion energy and solar power, while generally protecting the nation's defense laboratories as they adjust to the post-Cold War era.

The \$18.7 billion spending bill for the Energy Department and other agencies, which is \$1.6 billion smaller than the one enacted last year, is the first test of how appropriators will reconcile budget-cutting with the Republican leadership's avowed support for science.

The result did not please Democrats, who warned that the bill appeared to accelerate a trend toward a smaller role for the federal government in promoting U.S. scientific pre-eminence, while relying more on the private sector or internationally financed projects.

They noted that the same subcommittee, on energy and water development, only recently voted to terminate such bold physics projects as the Superconducting Super Collider and the advanced neutron source.

"A lot of these new Republicans think the private sector will pick up the slack in research," said a Democratic aide. "They're go-

ing to learn that if the government doesn't do it, the private sector won't."

Republicans responded that the bill protects overall Energy Department spending on basic research, while cutting projects that have been what Rep. Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.), chairman of the House Science Committee, called a "life-support system" for private companies and universities.

While the energy and water bill reduces spending on energy supply, research and development by \$717 million, it funds the Pentagon's nuclear programs at \$10 billion, only slightly lower than this year. Included is \$3.2 billion for nuclear weapons activities. The president had asked for more than that.

The subcommittee also approved \$40 million to assist three giant energy companies in designing changes to their advanced light water nuclear reactors to meet safety requirements of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

General Electric Co., Westinghouse Electric Corp. and Asea Brown Boveri Inc. put up half of the funds, but the aid has been criticized in the past as "corporate welfare."

The subcommittee also allocated \$20 million for the development of a gas turbine helium reactor, a project of General Atomics Inc. of San Diego. The cost of building such a reac-

tor has been estimated at \$1 billion and has been criticized by environmentalists and taxpayer groups. Clinton proposed terminating funding in 1996.

Supporters of the fusion program, whose federal funding would be reduced from this year's \$372.5 million to \$229 million under the subcommittee bill, called the cut a "disaster." But representatives of Princeton University's Plasma Physics Laboratory, which receives about one-third of those funds, vowed not to abandon hope for eventual construction of a \$1 billion experimental fusion facility.

The House Science subcommittee on energy and environment has strongly suggested that rather than funding that project, the bulk of U.S. fusion money should eventually go to a consortium of the United States, Russia, Japan and the European Community.

The \$229 million fusion figure had been that subcommittee's recommendation. But House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) appeared to give the fusion program a boost Sunday when he said on ABC's "This Week With David Brinkley" that he was "very concerned that we're going to cut too deeply into science."

Gingrich was responding to a question from columnist George Will about cuts that threatened to "shut down the Princeton laboratory

even though it's doing extremely important fusion energy research." Will attended graduate school at Princeton.

But yesterday, it took an amendment by Rep. Rodney P. Frelinghuysen (R-N.J.) to bring it to the \$229 million level after a deeper cut was proposed by subcommittee Chairman John T. Myers (R-Ind.). Concerning the proposed reductions in renewable energy programs, which have received strong support from the Clinton administration, Myers said: "We're not getting our bang for the buck."

Along with those reductions, the subcommittee approved reductions in the biological and environmental research accounts that fund research into global climate change and high-performance computing.

The bill closely followed the recommendations of the House Science energy subcommittee, the authorizing panel. In past years it has had little influence on decisions of the appropriators. But this year the Science Committee is headed by Walker, a close associate of Gingrich who is determined to leave his mark on science policy.

But Myers retains considerable leverage, because his bill includes, along with the energy programs, dozens of water and reclamation projects that are highly popular with members.