

(March 20, 2007) Science Agency Asks Lawmakers to Boost Funding

Science agency asks lawmakers to boost staff funding By Aliya Sternstein, National Journal's Technology Daily The National Science Foundation -- the origin of most federal funding for technology research -- had a chance to air its wish list with Congress on Tuesday and repeatedly sought more staffing resources. The House Science and Technology Research and Science Education Subcommittee invited NSF leaders to a hearing on pending legislation that would reauthorize core agency activities, change administrative laws and set new policy directions. With new researchers having difficulty getting their proposals approved, subcommittee Chairman Brian Baird, D-Wash., asked NSF Director Arden Bement what can be done to nurture young talent. Bement said many of the opportunities for mentoring young investigators -- such as workshops on the merit-review process and pairing program officers with young investigators to help them resubmit proposals -- are "dependent entirely on" NSF staff. "At the present time, they are chronically overworked." In fiscal 2006, new investigators were successful at winning grants 18 percent of the time, compared with a 30 percent success rate among veteran researchers who had received prior awards. Bement said NSF needs more automated tools to take some of the workload off the personnel. The employees also require more travel money to meet with investigators in person. "I would urge that in reauthorization that that be a major priority," he said. Baird said, "So, we will make that a priority." Steven Beering, chairman of the National Science Board, NSF's independent advisory panel, said, "The board has been especially concerned with a major area of NSF responsibility -- education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics," or STEM for short. The board's commission on STEM education will issue a draft action plan for reforming education at an upcoming March board meeting, according to Beering. One recommendation will be extending the school year to compete with countries that already have longer school years. Many of the lawmakers present expressed interest in discussing the forthcoming education study with NSF's advisory board, which was something that Beering had encouraged in his testimony. Rep. Daniel Lipinski, D-Ill., who successfully applied for an NSF grant as a graduate student, asked about the disproportionate size of NSF's education budget in comparison to its other research budgets. "Perhaps NSF is being squeezed out of the K-12 education sector?" Lipinski wondered. This document is located at <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0307/032007tdpm1.htm>