

Summary of '08 SLUO/UEC/USLUO Trip to DC

Each year, SLUO organizes a trip to Washington D.C. in conjunction with Fermilab users and, recently, U.S. LHC users. We went to Washington D.C. from March 11-14 this year and met with about 150 members of Congress, including about 60-70% of all Members of the appropriations committee for Energy & Water and Commerce, Justice, and Science. Greg Madejski and Steve Sekula led the trip for the SLUO team, which consisted of 10 individuals who are SLAC users. What follows is a summary of our experiences during this trip.

FY08 and the Omnibus

Some messages we got on FY08 were helpful, and some sobering. The biggest message was that just about every member of Congress we met regretted what happened. Many expressed general concern for the nation, some specific concern for HEP, and a few even expressed anger at the outcome and a sense that this must never happen again. Staffers closest to those with the most vested interest in the sciences and national science policy hinted that the cuts were indeed targeted, but in a broad way: things were cut that couldn't be cut. That is, faced with a veto from the President on any spending over his limits, the majority went straight for the things that would cause the most outcry. ITER is an excellent example.

The President is likely to send a supplemental request to the Congress for Iraq war funding. It is unlikely that he will tack a request for science supplemental funding onto that, as it could cause outrage in Congress that he chose one program over others for supplemental aid. The President also doesn't want to be seen as fixing a problem he thinks is Congress - the inability to fund basic science (see his State of the Union Address, for instance). There are various efforts in both the House and Senate to insert such supplemental funding into the war supplemental.

FY08 Supplemental - The Danger of Partisan Politics

A supplemental would reset the FY08 budget baseline to a higher level and most likely restore our participation in ITER. The potential effect on specific HEP programs is unknown. These are all international programs with international partners, including some agreements already negotiated, and with domestic contracts for equipment and resources. They are high-priorities. Supplemental funding probably won't save or restore many jobs, but it can put the U.S. back on a path, stabilize international relations in the field, and prepare our field for the likelihood of a difficult funding year.

Inserting money into the supplemental will be the job of the House, which must initiate all spending. However, the House doesn't need a strong bi-partisan effort to pass something. Currently, the House effort seems primarily to come from the Illinois delegation, although leadership in the House has expressed support for the insertion of science into a supplemental. There was a sense that more states need to lead this effort to insert science, or there is a good chance it will fail.

There is also a danger that Democrats might roll over the spending concerns of the Republicans, violating the long bi-partisan support of science. This could derail the whole effort, as the Senate DOES need strong bi-partisanship to accomplish the passage of bills. The majority in the Senate is too slim. An omnibus passed by partisanship in the House will die before reaching the Senate floor, or on it.

The Senate is building a coalition to support a bi-partisan supplemental request. Shortly after our visit, a letter and a press-release were released from a coalition of eight Senators, including Senators with obvious direct interests in ITER or national labs, in support of supplemental science appropriations for FY08.

FY09 and Beyond

It's going to be a very tough year. Although the President requested lots of additional money for basic research to get back in line with his American Competitiveness Initiative, he cut money on renewable energy and education programs dear to the Democrats. One need only look at the chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water to see the anger:

I am not a logician and therefore when looking toward fiscal year 2009 I fail to comprehend the President's logic in requesting a huge increase for Science while cutting funding for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy programs by \$467 million. I fail to comprehend the reason behind requesting a huge increase in Science while decimating the DOE environmental clean-up and the water programs under our jurisdiction by more than \$1 billion. - Congressman Pete Visclosky (D-IN)

This suggests, and was backed by appropriators handling both DOE and NSF, that Congress will restore the programs underfunded by the President, exceeding the President's overall spending target, and thus start a fight with him. We learned that the President has already made his veto threat - if the Congress attempts to appropriate more than he requested, he'll veto it. Most likely, it means that Congress will wait until after the elections to try to resolve any deadlock and pass spending bills.

Thus, the most likely scenario is that we enter continuing resolution (CR), meaning that Congress votes to fund FY09 at the FY08 level until they pass the bills next year.

There is some hope here. Members of Congress seem amenable to the idea of adjusting science in the CR (this was done in 2007), although it will take political will and champions. Another way to get this adjustment is the passage of supplemental FY08 science money, which then redefines the baseline for FY08 and softens the CR into FY09.

Messages from Congress

One clear message, based on the above, is that we cannot expect the Congress to act on appropriations until after the election. The scenarios presented to us all included a CR, followed by action in time for March of 2009. The hope is that a bump can occur in the CR for science, either by the supplemental or by distinct action taken by the Congress.

One of the largest messages we received this year, either directly or indirectly from meetings with staffers and Members of Congress, was the importance of communicating the impact of HEP. While some offices are still excited by the science itself - especially those with whom this is the first time we've had a chance to meet or those not involved in authorization or appropriation - what most Members want to know is the quantitative impact of the science: students trained; impact on industry and medicine through joint projects, technological spin-offs, or transfer of the workforce from the field to other disciplines. The science itself is not enough, though it's a compelling part of the message Congress wants - broadly, the message from the field has to be about our impact on the nation.