Congress Orders Halt to Planned NASA Cuts

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Researchers upset about cuts to space station research have found some allies in Congress. A powerful House panel that sets NASA's budget last week ordered the agency to halt its plans to gut nearly 40% of the orbiting facility's science program. It also added money to rescue one set of experiments and asked President George W. Bush for a "clear and unambiguous statement" on the role of research aboard the orbiting lab. The move sets the stage for another confrontation between Congress and the new Administration over who should pay for the station's skyrocketing price tag.

This spring, the White House refused to request additional funding to meet an overrun of more than $4 billion on the $60 billion facility, ordering NASA to find the money within the program's own strained budget. That prompted NASA to scale back the number of crew members planned for the station as well as its budget for research equipment. Researchers quickly claimed that those moves would cripple science aboard the orbiting lab (Science, 23 March, p. 2291).

NASA Chief Scientist Kathie Olsen says the agency intends to spend, through 2006, 36% less on research facilities than the $4.4 billion in its original plans. Some areas, such as fundamental biology, would take up to an 80% cut. In 2002 alone, the $452 million planned for facilities would sink to $284 million, according to Olsen. She adds that the changes amount to a shortfall of only $70 million to $75 million in research-related efforts in 2002, in part because a new round of delays in launching station hardware means there's no rush to build some of the experimental facilities. But Olsen insists the cuts don't mean a reduced commitment to science: "Research remains central on the station—I am adamant on this."

The House panel moved last week to ease the problem by adding $35 million for fluids and combustion research, which accounts for a small portion of planned 2002 station research funding. Much of that program is run by the Glenn Research Center in Cleveland. The panel also added $275 million for work on a crew return vehicle to carry six persons—the number needed to support the station's ambitious scientific agenda—provided the Administration includes funding for the vehicle in its 2003 budget planning.

The committee has asked for a comprehensive plan on the station by 1 March 2002, and it told NASA to suspend its plans to cut research until Congress decides the number of crew members. The agency is setting up an independent panel to review NASA's scaled-back station plan, with a report due by the end of the year. NASA is also searching for cheaper alternatives to keep research on track, including use of the space shuttle for extended periods.

In the meantime, NASA's international partners are having their own problems. A Japanese centrifuge to conduct a host of biological experiments has been delayed repeatedly because of technical problems and won't be available to researchers until late 2008. Such distant dates frustrate would-be station researchers. "It's just so discouraging," says Patricia Russell, executive director of the American Society for Gravitational and Space Biology.
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