

US Senate votes surprise reprieve for NIH. . .

Washington. In a formidable vote of confidence in the biomedical research community, the US Senate has overwhelmingly rejected a proposal from its own budget committee to cut the future expenditure of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by 10 per cent.

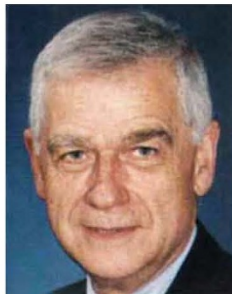
Last week, the Senate approved by 85 votes to 14 an amendment from Senator Mark Hatfield (Republican, Oregon) restoring \$7 billion of proposed cuts over the next seven years. In a week when both House and Senate passed budget resolutions cutting discretionary spending virtually across the board, the NIH was the only agency in the entire federal government to have cuts restored in either chamber.

Even Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico), chair of the budget committee, voted for the amendment to a resolution which he himself had put forward. According to biomedical lobbyists, who said after the vote that they were surprised at the scale of their victory, Domenici privately blamed his own over-zealous committee staff for drawing up a resolution which

assumed the 10 per cent NIH cut.

The amendment will restore NIH funding to \$11.2 billion a year — just short of this year's level of \$11.3 billion. The money will be diverted by cutting 0.6 per cent from all other discretionary programmes, apart from those of defence, health and education. Non-NIH science programmes will share the burden: the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for example, will lose about an extra \$80 million a year as a result of the Hatfield amendment.

Harold Varmus, director of NIH, said after the vote that he was "very pleased with the support that the senators have shown". But he added that it was "important to remember that this is still early in the [1996



Hatfield: admits 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'.

fiscal year] appropriations process."

During the debate, not one senator spoke up for the NIH cut, which Hatfield branded "a prelude to disaster" for medical research. Robert Byrd (Democrat, West Virginia) did oppose the amendment, observing that it "in effect, merely rearranges the deck chairs on the *Titanic*."

Hatfield said that he had wanted to offset the cut against the entire budget, including military expenditure, but that such a proposal would have only won about 20 votes. He therefore offered a proposal that would take the money from a much smaller pot of non-military spending. "It is a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul," he said. "Not my preference, but the only way I could find to salvage NIH."

The Senate budget resolution now has to be reconciled with the House version, which proposes cuts of \$500 million from the NIH next year. Detailed allocation of funding to NIH and other agencies will be carried out by the appropriations committees in both chambers before a budget is finally agreed in September. **Colin Macilwain**

. . . but climate agency now finds itself on chopping block

Washington. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a key performer and user of environmental sciences in the United States, faces virtual dismemberment under proposals to disband its parent agency, the Department of Commerce, that are under discussion in Congress.

A bill published last week by Dick Chrysler (Republican, Michigan), chairman of a task force of newly-elected House Republicans which has been appointed to draw up a plan to dismantle the department, would require many of NOAA's scientific laboratories to be sold to the private sector.

But NOAA officials are sceptical that buyers would be found for the laboratories, which have played an important role in, for example, the discovery of the hole in the ozone layer and linking its expansion to the now-banned chlorofluorocarbons.

House panels are currently discussing the closure of various government departments, including Energy and Education. But Commerce is the most vulnerable, as Republican majorities in both the House and the Senate are committed to its abolition.

NOAA takes up 40 per cent of the Commerce Department's budget, and Chrysler is looking to the agency for about one-third of the savings — a total of \$2.3 billion over five years — that would be obtained by closing the department. NOAA's budget was \$2 billion last year, of which about \$600 million was spent on research.

Chrysler's bill would close NOAA's Office

of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research completely, on the grounds that its activities are "duplicative" or "better served by the private sector". It would offer NOAA's dozen environmental research laboratories — half of them based in Boulder, Colorado — for sale to the private sector through a clearing house set up to sell off unwanted parts of the Department of Commerce.

The bill would also eliminate NOAA's role in pollution research and its work on assessing the erosion of estuaries and coastlines. Other scientific functions of the agency, including its work on fisheries and weather forecasting, would be reduced in scope and transferred to the Interior Department.

Doug Hall, deputy administrator of NOAA, says the private sector will have no interest in buying laboratories whose main interest is "conducting science for the next century". He says that the agency is already planning to reduce its 14,000-strong workforce by one-sixth by 1999.

Hall points out that NOAA has already moved to save money on weather satellites by sharing data with the Department of Defense, and has made progress in collecting user fees for some of its scientific work.

The Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research will spend \$260 million this year on research, about \$110 million of which will be distributed to universities through grants and other partnership arrangements. NOAA officials say that less than a quarter of this programme would survive the impact

of Chrysler's proposals.

Kathy Sullivan, chief scientist at NOAA, says that a recent review of the agency's laboratory network — which included the environmental laboratories and 29 fisheries laboratories — enabled the agency to fine-tune its research priorities, but found little duplication between facilities.

She denies that the wide distribution of laboratories is ripe for rationalization. "When your research obligation deals with all the fish stocks in the United States you can't do it out of one laboratory in Kansas City," says Sullivan.

A companion bill to Chrysler's will soon be introduced into the Senate by Spencer Abraham (Republican, Michigan), and is expected to offer a similar prescription for NOAA. This is despite the fact that the chief motive for shutting the Commerce Department is its involvement in a raft of activities, such as support for advanced technology projects, to which the Republicans are ideologically opposed.

Congress has not yet shown any indication that it wants to shut down much of the science behind weather forecasting and fishery protection. The budget resolutions passed by House and Senate already assume cuts — of 11 and 5 per cent respectively — in NOAA's budget for next year. The agency has plenty of friends in Congress, and these will now try to ensure that its science base is not eroded by much more than the lower figure, whatever the future of the department to which it currently belongs. **C. M.**