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CONGRESS PASSES RESOLUTION TO CONTINUE GOVERNMENT; WILL RETURN NOVEMBER 16

On September 29, two days before the start of the 2005 fiscal year, the 108th Congress assured itself a lame-duck session by passing a Continuing Resolution (CR) to fund the government through November 20. With both the House and Senate in recess until November 16, and ten FY 2005 appropriations bills still undone, Congress needed the CR to keep the government functioning.

While the House adjourned on October 9, the Senate was held up by Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA), who threatened to stall action on the tax cut package conference report until October 12 if the leadership refused to take action on the reservist employer tax credit as separate legislation. The chamber finally adjourned today, October 11, when a deal was brokered with Landrieu that would attach her tax credit to a pending House bill.

Upon their return, Congress hopes to wrap the remaining FY 2005 appropriations bills into an Omnibus package, passing them as one bill and leaving town. This scenario may become complicated by the results of the election and the need to go to conference with the House and Senate versions of the Intelligence reform bill.

In the meantime, agencies are spending at their FY 2004 levels and waiting for the decisions that will allow them to move into FY 2005, once again late.

BUSH AND KERRY SURROGATES CLASH OVER SCIENCE POLICY

In a 90 minute discussion moderated by Mary Wooley of Research!America, representatives of the two major presidential campaigns presented very different views of where science and technology policy has been during the past four years and where it would go in the next four. Robert Walker, former Congressman and House Science Committee Chairman and now President of Wexler and Walker Associates, represented President Bush. Henry Kelly, a physicist, President of the Federation of American Scientists, and former Assistant Director for Technology at the Clinton White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, represented Senator Kerry. The event was held at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) on September 30.

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BUSH AND KERRY, (Continued from Page 1)

Armed with statistics that we have heard from current OSTP Director John Marburger as well as others, Walker cited the Bush administration's record. Using the President's FY 2005 budget request numbers, he declared that the Science and Technology budget had grown by 44 percent in the past three years to its highest total ever, \$132 billion. He noted that as a percentage of discretionary budget outlays, research and development had also grown to its highest level, 13.5 percent. Walker also pointed out that basic research was at its all time high of \$26.8 billion, and had grown by 26 percent during the Bush administration.

Kelly responded that such growth had been driven by congressional initiatives, applied defense research, and the completion of doubling the National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget. Citing the AAAS's own budget analysis prepared by Kei Koizumi, Kelly noted that future budget forecasts from the Administration were bleak for anything outside of Defense and Homeland Security research and development. He particularly noted projections for decreases in the National Science Foundation (NSF) and NIH budgets. Kelly stated that Senator Kerry was in favor of "steady and predictable growth" for NSF and NIH, and remarked that the Senator supported doubling NSF's budget, as called for in the 2002 authorization act. However, according to Kelly, the Senator recognized the current fiscal realities, and thus the five year time period may need stretching.

When asked about research on human behavior, both representatives kept relatively quiet. Walker, who once wanted to eliminate NSF's Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate (SBE), noted the importance of health research on prevention. Kelly made a reference to NSF's importance for these disciplines, and the difficulty in increasing support for that particular area, given his earlier charges. He also referred to the importance of research on obesity.

Reflecting earlier reports, especially by the Union of Concerned Scientists, Kelly further argued that the Administration had "politicized science" in its use of the scientific advisory appointment process, the decision to limit stem cell research, and other activities that restrict scientific inquiry. Walker responded that this was not the case, and scientists who had "politicized science" should be wary of possible "pushback." When asked to clarify, Walker simply stated "if they get involved in politics, they're going to find they're in politics."

The discussion also focused on climate change research, stem cell research, energy research, international

students, the President's announced plans for Mars exploration, and his "innovation agenda," including Walker's favorite – the development of a hydrogen economy. Kelly challenged the Administration's policies in each of these areas and argued that Senator Kerry would set science and technology priorities in a better and less partisan way. They both agreed that peer review is indispensable. The debate is available online at www.aaas.org. To see the respective campaigns' responses to a series of questions posed by AAAS, see SCIENCE Magazine, October 1, 2004.

CONGRESS FOCUSES ON OBESITY BEFORE ADJOURNMENT

Congress gave the issue of obesity a prominent place on its agenda before adjourning. Both the House and Senate held hearings on what has been called a growing problem of "epidemic proportions" among American youth and adults.

The House Government Reform Subcommittee on Wellness and Health, Chaired by Rep. Dan Burton (R-IN) held a hearing on September 15, entitled "Conquering Obesity: The U.S. Approach to Combating this National Health Crisis." Witnesses included a nutritional scientist, a behavioral scientist, officials from the USDA, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the National Food Processors' Association, and the American Obesity Association.

Many Subcommittee members began by citing statistics from the 1999 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, conducted by the DHHS. This survey found that 31 percent of U.S. adults over the age of twenty are obese, and over 65 percent are estimated to be overweight. As Burton stated in his opening remarks, "It is well known that obesity puts individuals at a far greater risk to have higher blood pressure rates and cholesterol levels, suffer from a disability, and can even lead to premature death. In addition, previous studies clearly show that obesity-related medical expenses cost us billions of dollars each year." Ranking member, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), pointed out that obesity harms low-income citizens, who often have less access to nutritious food.

Waxman also expressed concern to the first witness, USDA Undersecretary Eric Bose, about the pending changes in the food-stamp program. The program, according to Waxman, now only targets

women and children in at-risk groups, which would reduce those whom the program serves by 80 percent in California alone. Bose pointed out that the focus of the USDA programming is to help adults and children make informed decisions about nutrition. When confronted by several subcommittee members about the USDA's reluctance to discourage certain foods lacking nutritional value, Bose responded that targeting certain producers is against USDA policy. Rep. Diane Watson (D-CA) and Burton countered by scorning the agency for its misguided priorities.

Both Morgan Downey, Executive Director of the American Obesity Association, and former COSSA briefing speaker Thomas Wadden, Vice President of the North American Association for the Study of Obesity, advocated for more research funding, even going so far as to propose doubling the NIH budget for obesity research. This was met with resistance from Burton, who cited the tight budget restraints due to the war in Iraq. Wadden emphasized a need for interaction between the public and private sectors in order to solve this problem, citing NIH as one of the only major research institutions attempting to determine where the best point of intervention is for halting obesity.

Also testifying before the subcommittee was a group of witnesses affiliated with food producers. Both Alison Kretzker, the Director of Scientific and Nutrition Policy for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, and Hunt Shipman of the National Food Processors' Association reiterated their constituents' commitment to end the obesity epidemic. But as Shipman pointed out, "Food companies succeed by meeting consumer demand." Burton and Kretzker became involved in a heated exchange when Burton pointed out that industry manufacturers should not be gearing junk food advertisements at children, and that perhaps public service announcements were in order to counter these ads.

On the Senate side, the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a hearing entitled "Reducing Childhood Obesity: Public-Private Partnerships to Improve Nutrition and Increase Physical Activity in Children." Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) chairs the Committee. However, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) made a surprise appearance and chaired the entire hearing as a demonstration of the leadership's commitment to this issue.

Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) served as the sole witness on the hearing's first panel, arguing that half-measures by Congress will not work to alleviate the childhood obesity problem. Senators Tom Harkin (D-

IA) and Christopher Dodd (D-CT) joined in the dialogue, deriding junk food advertisements and poor school lunch providers in disadvantaged communities. Dixie Snider, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Chief Officer for Science, and Lynn Swann, Chairman of the President's Council on Physical Fitness, both emphasized behavioral change as the first line of defense in overcoming obesity.

Dodd asked Snider several poignant questions about the CDC's course of action for this problem. He indirectly criticized the Administration by pointing out that it cut funding for the VERB anti-obesity campaign, and compelled Snider to admit that the campaign ought to be funded. When Wyden cited research showing that the poorest are often the most nutrition deficient, Snider postulated that the ultimate solution to this problem is finding a way to make nutritious food more "economically attractive" while making junk food less so.

The hearing ended with a panel of non-governmental experts, including Nike President Gary DeStefano. On this panel, the focus shifted back toward ways in which public-private partnerships can help to change behavior. The idea of health insurance incentives for those who stay within a healthy weight range also came up during the question and answer session.

The two hearings emphasized the need for additional research and public service campaign funding to alleviate the obesity problem, in general. Whether the discussion centered around parental behavior changes or advertisement regulations, it is clear that obesity will likely carry into the next session of Congress as an issue of concern.

IOM REPORT: NATIONAL MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH NEEDED TO COMBAT OBESITY

The September 30th report released by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies, entitled *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, calls for a multi-pronged, comprehensive approach to preventing childhood obesity that includes government, schools, families, communities, and industry. The report, commissioned by Congress, repeatedly emphasizes that no single intervention or group acting alone can stop the epidemic of childhood obesity.

Preventing Childhood Obesity contains explicit goals for preventing obesity in youth and a set of recommendations for the different segments of society.

“Obesity prevention requires an evidence-based public health approach to assure that recommended strategies and actions will have their intended effect,” stresses the Committee in the report. Consequently, a sustained commitment of effort and resources spanning many years – maybe decades – will be required to effectively address the problem, the report states.

Led by Jeffrey Koplan of Emory University, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the 19-member Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth spent two years examining “all of the evidence” regarding the factors involved in childhood obesity as well as interventions that show promise for improving eating habits and increasing physical activity. “This report is calling for fundamental changes in our society. This is a collective responsibility and we, as a nation, need to move toward providing a healthier environment in which our children and youth can grow up,” emphasized Koplan when releasing the report.

Koplan acknowledged the Committee’s recognition that a number of its recommendations “challenge entrenched aspects of American life and business, but if we are not willing to make some fundamental shifts in our attitudes and actions, obesity’s toll on our nation’s health and well-being will only worsen.”

Obesity Prevention: A Complex Issue

The committee acknowledges that “obesity prevention is a complex of interacting cultural, social, economic, familial, and psychological issues.” It also recognizes that a “thorough understanding of the causes and determinants of the obesity is lacking, and that progress will require changes not only in individual and family behaviors but also in the marketplace and the social and built environments.” The report underscores that “many of the social and cultural characteristics that the U.S. population has accepted as a normal way of life may collectively contribute to the growing levels of childhood obesity.”

A National Public Health Priority: Leadership Required

The first of the report’s ten recommendations states that the federal government must provide the needed leadership to make obesity prevention a national public health priority. Additionally, the “political will” to make childhood obesity prevention a priority requires the commitment of “adequate and

sustained resources for surveillance, research, public health programs, evaluation, and dissemination.” The role of State and local governments is also highlighted – including a recognition of their roles in decision-making and actions on such issues as street and neighborhood design, plans for parks and community recreational facilities, and the locations of new schools and retail facilities.

Comprehensive Obesity Prevention Strategy Essential

The primary recommendation of *Preventing Childhood Obesity* encourages the President to request that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) convene a high-level taskforce to ensure coordinated budgets, policies, program requirements, and to establish effective interdepartmental collaborations and priorities for action. To implement the recommendation, the report encourages the federal government to:

- Strengthen research and program efforts addressing obesity prevention, with a focus on experimental behavioral research and community-based intervention research. It also encourages a focus upon a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, and scaling up of prevention interventions.
- Support extensive program and research efforts to prevent childhood obesity in high-risk populations such as those with health disparities, focusing on both behavioral and environmental approaches.
- Support nutrition and physical activity grant programs, particularly in states with the highest prevalence of childhood obesity
- Strengthen support for relevant surveillance and monitoring efforts, particularly the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).
- Undertake an independent assessment of federal nutrition assistance programs and agricultural policies to ensure that they promote a healthful dietary intake and physical activity level for children and youth.
- Develop and evaluate pilot projects within the nutrition assistance programs that would promote healthful dietary intake and physical activity, and expand those found to be successful.

The Committee notes that while a robust evidence base to prevent obesity is not yet available, scientists are in “the midst of compiling that much-needed evidence at the same time that there is an urgent need to respond to this epidemic of childhood obesity.” Despite

the limited evidence, the Committee emphasizes that the health concerns are immediate and warrant preventive action. Accordingly, the Committee also recommends that all actions and initiatives include evaluation efforts to help build the needed evidence base.

Research Priorities

The IOM Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth was also asked to set forth research priorities. Because the study is focused upon prevention, the Committee concentrated its efforts on identifying areas of research that are priorities for progressing toward childhood obesity prevention. Three research priorities are discussed throughout the report:

1. **Evaluation of obesity prevention interventions** – Specific policy, environmental, social, clinical and behavioral intervention approaches should be examined for their feasibility, efficacy, effectiveness, and sustainability. Evaluations may be in the form of randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental trials. Cost effectiveness research should be an important component of evaluation efforts.
2. **Behavioral research** – The committee encourages experimental research examining the fundamental factors involved in changing dietary behaviors, physical activity levels, and sedentary behaviors. This research should inform new intervention strategies that are implemented and tested at individual, family, community, and population levels. This would also include studies that focus on factors promoting motivation to change behavior, strategies to reinforce and sustain improved behavior, identification and removal of barriers to change, and specific ethnic and cultural influences on behavioral change.
3. **Community-based, population-level research** – The committee encourages experimental and observational research examining the most important established and novel factors driving changes in population health, how they are embedded in socioeconomic and built environments, how they impact obesity prevention, and how they affect society at large with regard to improving nutritional health, increasing physical activity, decreasing sedentary behaviors, and reducing obesity prevalence.

In addition to calling on parents and families to begin undertaking a more active lifestyle, the report also makes specific recommendations for schools at all levels, from preschool through high school. Additional recommendations are included for the food, beverage, and entertainment industries to voluntarily develop and implement guidelines for advertising and marketing directed at children. Likewise, recommendations for community organizations and health professionals are included in the report. Copies of the report are available at: <http://national-academies.org>

NIH STRATEGIC PLAN TO FIGHT OBESITY RELEASED

In late August, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) released the final version of its agency-wide *Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research*, a multi-dimensional research agenda designed to enhance the development of new research in the areas of greatest scientific opportunity and the coordination of obesity research across the NIH.

“We are pleased about this focused effort to identify research opportunities in obesity,” declared NIH Director Elias Zerhouni when releasing the report. Zerhouni created the NIH Obesity Research Task Force in 2003 to intensify basic and clinical research and to enhance the coordination of obesity research across the NIH. The Task Force is co-chaired by the directors of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease (NIDDK) and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI). The membership of the Task Force is made up of representatives from the 27 NIH institutes and centers.

The *Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research* discusses the role of the NIH in addressing the nation’s obesity epidemic. The report explains that the “increased prevalence of obesity has been fueled by a complex interplay of behavioral, sociocultural, economic, and environmental factors, acting against a backdrop of genetic and other biological factors.” Like the recent IOM report on preventing childhood obesity, the NIH strategic plan on obesity calls for a “broad-based national” effort, including contributions by NIH, other government agencies, researchers, the health care delivery system, professional organizations, advocacy groups, industry, community-based organizations, and public policy makers, among others (*See related stories*).

Notably, in line with several recent IOM reports as well as the NIH Roadmap call for inter- and multi-

disciplinary research, the NIH strategic plan calls for interdisciplinary research teams to bridge “the study of behavioral and environmental causes of obesity with the study of genetic and biologic causes.” It is emphasized that the “successful prevention and treatment of obesity may require a combination of behavioral, environmental and medical approaches in highly susceptible individuals.”

Research Goals

The goals of the NIH strategic plan for obesity research are organized under four themes:

1. **Research toward preventing and treating obesity through lifestyle modification.** This research will build upon the results of clinical trials that demonstrated successful behavioral and environmental approaches to lifestyle modification.
2. **Research toward preventing and treating obesity through pharmacologic, surgical, or other medical approaches.**
3. **Research toward breaking the link between obesity and its associated health conditions.**
4. **Cross-cutting research topics, including health disparities, technology, the fostering of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research teams, investigator training, translational research, and education/outreach efforts.** This goal emphasizes the need to focus upon special populations, including children, racial/ethnic minorities disproportionately affected by obesity, persons living in lower socioeconomic conditions or who have low literacy, women, older adults, those with disabilities, and those who are extremely obese.

Ultimately, according to the plan, the NIH seeks to create a new interdisciplinary approach in which behavioral or lifestyle interventions are informed by a deeper understanding of the biologic and genetic factors, and vice versa.

Agency Collaborations

The NIH strategic plan also addresses the growing discussion of the need for collaboration among the various federal agencies around obesity research. The plan explains that as initiatives are developed, announced, and reviewed, there is increased staff participation across the federal agencies. It also points out that there are opportunities available to provide joint support for efforts.

The full *Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research* is available on the web (<http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov/index.htm>) and is designed as a mechanism to aid investigators interested in pursuing obesity research. The site maintains an up-to-date list of NIH funding opportunities as they are launched. The site is slated to include information on NIH-sponsored scientific meetings, conferences, and workshops as well. None have been posted as of yet.

Request for Applications on Obesity and the Built Environment

The most recent solicitation for grant proposals relating to the social/behavioral sciences and obesity is a joint NIH/CDC request for applications (RFA) on *Obesity and the Built Environment* (RFA-ES-04-003), the subject of a recent NIH-sponsored conference on obesity (See *UPDATE*, May 27, 2004).

According to the RFA, the “built environment” is defined as encompassing all buildings, spaces, and products that are created or modified by people. It includes homes, schools, workplaces, parks and recreation areas, greenways, business areas, and transportation systems. The built environment also extends overhead, in the form of electric transmission lines, underground, in the form of waste disposal sites and subway trains, and across the country, in the form of highways. It includes land-use planning and policies that impact communities in urban, rural, and suburban areas.

This initiative will support studies in two specific areas related to the built environment and obesity: (1) understanding the role of the built environment in causing/ exacerbating obesity and related co-morbidities; and, (2) developing, implementing, and evaluating prevention/intervention strategies that influence parameters of the built environment in order to reduce the prevalence of overweight, obesity and co-morbidities.

This RFA specifically requires interdisciplinary partnerships. Teams must consist, at a minimum, of a scientist with expertise in health research (e.g., an epidemiologist, behavioral or social scientist), a clinical specialist (e.g., a nutritionist, pediatrician, cardiovascular specialist, healthcare provider, occupational therapist, or nurse) and an expert on planning, design, or transportation (e.g., representative of a local or state planning, transportation agency, or zoning department). A letter of intent is due **November 17** and the full application is due **December 17**. For full details, see <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-ES-04-003.html>.

CONFERENCE ON RACE, ETHNICITY, AND PLACE OFFERS FEDERAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

On September 16-18, 2004, the Association of American Geographers, Howard University, and Binghamton University collaborated to put on the “2004 Conference on Race, Ethnicity and Place” on Howard’s hilltop campus in Washington, DC. Geographers and social scientists gathered to discuss an array of issues including migration, demographic geography, agricultural geography, and the political geography. As leaders of the three sponsor organizations stated, “ the concept of place provides an insightful and meaningful framework for understanding migration, cultural conflicts over space, place-based identities, changing ethnic and racial landscapes, urban renewal and neighborhood politics, spatial dimensions of health inequalities, institutional roles and racial/ethnic relations, and much more.” The conference incorporated panel discussions, presentations, field trips to historic local sites, and student poster presentations in “advancing our understanding of the of the intersection of race, ethnicity and place.”

The conference hosted a panel entitled “Federal Perspectives on Geographic Research Needs,” which brought together several federal agency representatives to discuss the role of geographic research in their work, chaired by Toby Moore of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ).

While the representative from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department was noticeably absent, the remaining panelists from DOJ and the Department of Agriculture Economic Research Division (USDAER) engaged in a lively discussion about non-governmental contributions to the body of federal research.

John Cromartie, the USDAER representative, explained the research objectives of the department and its history, including a period when it was abolished due to the racial inequalities it documented in 1950s Mississippi. The two DOJ representatives, including Moore and Mario Lopez Gomez of the Civil Rights Division, focused more on the logistics of sharing their information with the public, and the occasions on which they may call upon outside experts for consultation. Cromartie also pointed out that on Capitol Hill, Rep. Adam Putnam (R-FL) was attempting to create a federal coordinator in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for the Geographic Information System (GIS), given the extent to which GIS is used by a vast array of federal agencies. This oversight could impact both departments and outside researchers in seeing the various points of use and contact between GIS and the federal government.

During the question and answer session, COSSA and AAG representatives inquired about what role non-federal social scientists and geographers can play in departmental research, and what incentives each department actually has to call upon external sources, given their extensive in-house operations.

Cromartie admitted that GIS seemed to need very little assistance with their research, but that there are occasional opportunities that organizations such as COSSA play a critical role in relating to social scientists and geographers. He also pointed out that contextual research done outside of the agencies may provide new and interesting perspectives if the research briefs were made

Gomez and Moore also contended that GIS is fairly self-sufficient, but that DOJ frequently consults with outside experts when trying to gather witnesses for federal cases involving issues such as racial polarization or voter discrimination. Several geographers present that were visibly frustrated about the lack of federal agency contacts available, and one questioner even made Cromartie admit that “personal connections” play a vital role in finding channels of influence. Overall, however, the panelists continued to emphasize the need for organizations such as COSSA, which monitors research opportunities and relates them to our members.

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The Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), an advocacy organization for Federal support for the social and behavioral sciences, was founded in 1981 and stands alone in Washington in representing the full range of social and behavioral sciences.

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