

House Passes Bill Requiring NSF to Certify Grants are “In the National Interest”

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Last week, the House passed legislation that would create an additional hurdle for the National Science Foundation (NSF) to award grants. The NSF’s mission is to promote the progress of science through research and education in nonmedical sciences and engineering, support university and other private research in mathematics and technical fields such as computer science, and support STEM education and student aid programs. The NSF currently reviews proposals for funding through an extensive merit review process. This new legislation, H.R. 3293, ostensibly does not affect the merit review process.

Under the House bill, H.R. 3293, however, before awarding funding, the NSF would have to make an affirmative determination that the grant promotes the progress of science in the United States and is worthy of Federal funding. The NSF would also have to determine that the grant is consistent with established scientific methods, is consistent with the definition of basic research, and is in the national interest. The bill specifies that a grant is in the national interest if it has the potential to achieve one of the following: (1) increased economic competitiveness in the United States; (2) the advancement of the health and welfare of the public; (3) the development of an American STEM workforce that is globally competitive; (4) increased public scientific literacy and public engagement with science and technology in the United States; (5) increased partnerships between academia and industry in the United States; (6) support for the national defense of the United States; or (7) the promotion of the progress of science for the United States. The NSF’s justification, made after the NSF otherwise evaluates proposals, must be made in writing.

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Sponsored by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), the bill is intended to increase transparency and accountability. The House committee on Science, Space, and Technology believes the bill will ensure NSF funding is accountable to the American taxpayer by offering a non-technical explanation of the project’s scientific merits and how it serves the national interest according to specific criteria. Proponents further argue that the bill is necessary oversight to ensure that NSF grants are funding worthy, non-frivolous proposals.

Critics, however, are concerned that the bill would change how NSF makes funding decisions. House Science Committee Democratic ranking member Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) also expressed concerns that the bill would inhibit high-risk, high-reward research. The White House has also criticized the bill, arguing that the bill does not increase accountability, and only adds to the administrative burden.

The bill will now go to the Senate. If the bill passes in the Senate, it will be presented to the President. The White House strongly opposes House passage of the bill, and has threatened to veto it.