



NIH FUNDING

# Success Rates Squeezed as Budget Growth Slows

The president's 2006 budget request last week contained dismal news for biomedical researchers—a mere 0.7% raise, to \$28.8 billion, for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). And the fine print was just as bad: Success rates for grant applications are projected to be 22% this year, down from 30% in 2003. That slump, along with an 8% drop in the number of new grants (see table, right), confirms predictions of tough times following the recent 5-year doubling of NIH's budget if NIH received annual increases of less than 6% (*Science*, 24 May 2002, p. 1401).

In the last years of the doubling, NIH held the success rate (the portion of applications funded) at around 30% to avoid creating an unsustainable number of new grants. Instead, administrators increased average grant size and put more money into infrastructure. A year ago, NIH hoped it could pull off a “soft landing” after the doubling ended in 2003: It predicted only a slight dip in new and competing grants in 2004 and recovery in 2005, with a still-healthy 27% success rate. (“New and competing” refers to newly funded projects and grants coming up for renewal, which make up about one-fourth of all grants in the NIH portfolio. The rest are continuations of multiyear grants.)

But NIH received less money in 2005 for research grants than even the 2.7% increase it

had expected, explains NIH Associate Director for Budget Richard Turman. NIH has also received far more applications than predicted since 2003, as some investigators increased

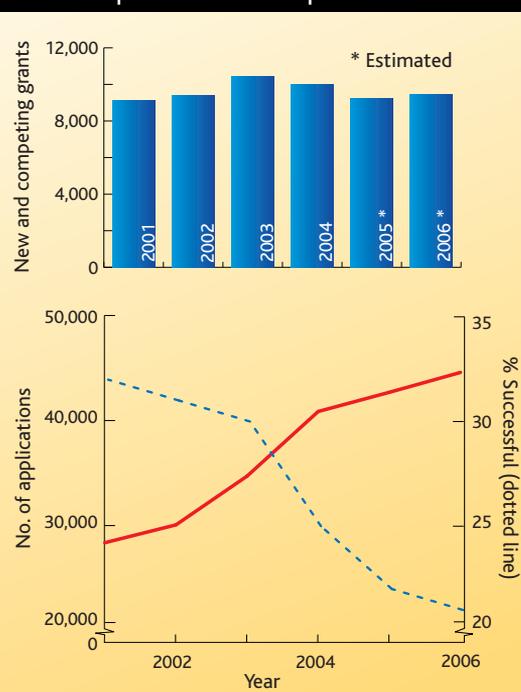
the number of proposals they submitted. On the bright side, says NIH Deputy Director for Extramural Research Norika Ruiz Bravo, the number of new investigators supported each year continues to rise.

At NIH council meetings last month, some institutes announced a lowered pay line in 2005, the peer-review ranking that is the cutoff for funding. That news is raising the specter of a return to the early 1990s, when tight budgets forced reviewers to make “dysfunctional” decisions about equally good applications, says Howard Garrison, public affairs director for the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

He and others are worried that some investigators may be forced to trim staff or even leave research. “It's very hard, after downsizing your lab, to build back up again,” says Susan Gerbi, who until recently was chair of molecular biology at Brown University. She hopes Congress will heed that message as it considers NIH's 2006 budget. “We are holding our breath” in current competitions, says Gerbi.

—JOCELYN KAISER

NIH Competition Heats Up



U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY

# New Rules Ease Scientific Exchanges

The United States last week changed its visa rules to make it easier for foreign students and scientists working on sensitive technologies to reenter the country after overseas trips. The new policy, announced last week by the State Department, extends the validity of security clearances, now 1 year, to 4 years for international students and 2 years for foreign scientists.

Until now, foreign scholars working in certain fields had to undergo an extensive interagency security review—known as a Visas Mantis check—every time they wanted to reenter the United States. Only those who had received a clearance within the preceding 12 months were exempt. In the tightened security environment after the 2001 terrorists attacks, that procedure

resulted in major delays for thousands of international graduate students and researchers returning to the United States after visiting their home countries or attending conferences overseas. After complaints from scientific and educational associations, federal officials promised to extend the validity of Mantis clearances (*Science*, 27 August 2004, p. 1222).

“We now have better information sharing between federal agencies and systems to track whether students and researchers have changed their fields of study,” says C. Stewart Verdery, outgoing assistant secretary for Border/Transportation Security Policy at the Department of Homeland Security and one of the officials who worked on the extension. “Given those factors, it seems like a redun-

dancy to do repeat security checks for the same individual.”

The new policy “eliminates a lot of uncertainty for foreign students in the United States,” says Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities. More broadly, he says, “it sends a message that international students and scholars are welcome here.”

Scientists in other countries who visit the United States often will also benefit from another change that extends the validity of a Mantis clearance for such visits from the duration of a single visit to a year. Verdery says the change ensures that “security constraints don't make the United States less attractive as a venue for scientific conferences.”

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE

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