

Scientists turn to public relations in bid for funds

By Larry Witham
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Government support sought for 'basic' research

The public likes most of what science produces. And it thinks brilliant researchers are vastly underappreciated compared with movie stars and sports heroes.

So why does 1997 open with general gloom about a decline in science funding and prestige?

"It's not written in stone that the science budget is going to be cut in the next seven years," said Mary Wooley, the president of Research America, which polls public attitudes on science.

What scientists have to do is turn to their public, she said, and say, "I work for you."

That slogan is part of a growing effort among scientists to win public support to survive tough votes in Congress. The current deficit-fighting plan is to cut science spending by a third over seven years. In fiscal 1996 it was mostly untouched.

"Scientists have to be public advocates," said Mrs. Wooley, whose Alexandria-based organization

culls public information for its 350 science organization members. "Not only because they are publicly supported, but to show the public how it is being served."

But activism comes slowly to scientists. Some worry that debates on science funding already have become too politicized.

A Roper poll last year found that 74 percent of the public wanted "people who make important scientific or technological discoveries" to get more acclaim.

Still, some scientists say, cultural trends may be against them. Since the Vietnam War, science has been viewed as an arm of big government. More recently, a third of Americans have said they have faith in new kinds of "science," such as alternative medicine.

"A few years ago, the word 'lobby' is something a scientist just couldn't utter," said Robert L. Park, the director of the Washington office of the American Phys-

ical Society, which represents physicists. "It's inevitable now."

While the urge to cut the federal deficit is the primary bad omen for science, there are other reasons that "basic" science — research done for knowledge itself — is no longer as well-heeled.

Competitive pressures from deregulation and loss of tax write-offs for research prompted industries to close labs. Now 80 percent of basic science is done at universities, said Mr. Park, a University of Maryland professor. With the close of the Cold War, he added, the "science Olympics" with Moscow ended.

So the prevailing mood now is science as business, and research funders seek quick market pay-offs, Mr. Park and others said.

"You can't keep producing all these benefits to society if you neglect the long-term knowledge base," Mr. Park said.

Despite the budget crunch, President Clinton has made sci-

ence one of eight priorities.

"We must continue to invest and do more in medical and scientific research," Mr. Clinton said in a policy speech in December. "We can make this age of science and technology a true age of possibility."

A strategy to identify "anti-science" politicians divides advocates, however. It relates to the Science-Watch Service Inc. issuance in September of a science score card on House members.

The survey of 30 floor votes the past two years made Democrats look pro-science, with 132 scoring above 70 percent, and Republicans appear anti-science, with 140 scoring below 39 percent.

Retiring Rep. Robert S. Walker, Pennsylvania Republican and chairman of the House Science Committee, criticized the survey for merely rewarding big spenders.

"If you're an honest student, do your homework and make the hard decisions about good science, you

fail," he wrote Roland Schmitt, the director of Science-Watch.

In releasing the report, Mr. Schmitt defended it as a new kind of grass-roots advocacy. "Until now the science community has been able to take care of its business inside the Beltway," he said. "That era is passing."

Last year's National Science Foundation (NSF) survey of public attitudes found the highest interest (70 percent) in medical research. Coincidentally, the only major science item increased in the last budget was the National Institutes of Health.

But governmental support has its problems. Many scientists, Mr. Park said, feel that manned spaceflight under the National Aeronautics and Space Administration excites the public but no longer advances research.

In this budget cycle, NASA got nearly \$14 billion of the nation's \$80 billion budget for research and development. Public interest in space travel is at 25 percent, half the interest in environmental issues, the NSF survey found.