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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE

The House met today in pro forma session. The Senate met to consider legislation to raise the statutory debt limit (H.J. Res. 45), with no roll call votes.

When the House reconvenes next Tuesday, January 26, the chamber will consider several bills on suspension, as well as a bill to establish a national historic site in the Virgin Islands (H.R. 3726) and legislation dealing with water diversions on federal land in Idaho (H.R. 4474). The chamber will not be in session after Wednesday because House Republicans are holding their annual policy retreat from Thursday through Saturday.

The Senate next week is expected to continue consideration of the debt limit legislation and to consider the nomination of Ben Bernanke for a second term as chair of the Federal Reserve Board.

Also next week, President Obama will deliver his first State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday, January 27. The speech is expected to focus on jobs and fiscal responsibility.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

UNITED FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH REPORTS ON BENEFITS OF NIH RECOVERY ACT FUNDING  NEW

United for Biomedical Research, an advocacy coalition in which AAU participates, released a report January 19 that details how research institutions across the country are using Recovery
Act funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to promote better health and a stronger economy.

The report, Investing in Recovery and Discovery, discusses the overall impact of the $10.4 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds provided to NIH in FY09 and FY10. This includes the potential for discoveries that will lead to the next generation of treatments and cures, as well as the estimate by NIH that the funding is saving or preserving 50,000 jobs in research institutions and organizations around the U.S. The report also features research scientists discussing their Recovery Act-funded work.

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

SECRETARY OF ENERGY URGES SENATORS TO SUPPORT CLEAN ENERGY R&D NEW

At a January 21 hearing of the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee, Secretary of Energy Steven Chu discussed the importance of clean energy research and development in addressing the nation’s energy, climate, and economic challenges. He also expressed concern that R&D had been missing from much of the discussion about energy and climate legislation.

The Secretary’s written statement said that along with providing the technological breakthroughs needed to steeply reduce greenhouse gases, the investment in energy R&D would drive innovation across the economy, maintain American competitiveness, and create jobs and entire new industries. He noted the example of a battery company funded by the Department of Energy that has developed a cutting-edge battery technology for hybrid and electric vehicles. The company is now using Recovery Act funds to help build a new manufacturing plant in Michigan.

Secretary Chu also mentioned that when the Department was preparing for the first grant competition at the new Advanced Research Projects Agency—Energy, the “technical community responded heroically” after he asked research university presidents to provide names of the best scientists and engineers to help review proposals. The individuals selected to participate helped ARPA-E review 3,700 applications in just a few short weeks, he said.

AAU COMMENTS TO OSTP ON PUBLIC ACCESS POLICIES NEW

In response to a request issued last December by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), AAU on January 21 submitted comments on how federal science and technology funding agencies might best increase public access to the results of federally funded research.

The AAU letter notes that the association’s comments on the nine questions asked in the OSTP request draw heavily on the report of the Scholarly Publishing Roundtable, issued on January 12. The report calls on federal agencies that fund research to develop and implement policies that ensure free public access to the results of the research they fund “as soon as possible after those results have been published in a peer-reviewed journal.” The report further urges agencies to balance the need for increased public access to research articles with the need to “preserve the essential functions of the scholarly publishing enterprise.”
The Roundtable, an expert panel of librarians, library scientists, publishers, and university academic leaders, was convened last summer by the House Committee on Science and Technology, in collaboration with OSTP. The group was asked to examine the state of scholarly publishing and seek consensus recommendations for expanding public access to scholarly journal articles. It was chaired by AAU Executive Vice President John Vaughn.

Dr. Vaughn also submitted the Roundtable report with a cover statement to the OSTP public access blog on January 21.

ASSOCIATIONS WEIGH IN ON BIOSIMILARS PROVISIONS IN HEALTH CARE BILLS

Thirty-eight organizations and universities, including AAU, wrote to House and Senate Democratic leaders on January 14 to express strong support for inclusion of a regulatory pathway for biosimilars in a final health care reform package.

Biosimilars, or “follow-on biologics,” are lower-cost versions of complex biotechnology drugs—called biologics—that have been developed by pharmaceutical or biotechnology companies.

The organizations’ letter says that both the House and Senate health bills include pathways “that will ensure patients have access to lower cost therapeutics while providing incentives for continued medical research and innovation,” but that the language approved by the House Energy and Commerce Committee is preferable and should be adopted. The letter reiterates that the university community is aligned in believing that 12 years of patent exclusivity for biosimilars “is the appropriate number to ensure continued research.”

The BIO-sponsored coalition letter was circulated amid reports that White House and congressional negotiators were considering changes to the follow-on-biologics provisions.

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