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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House met today to consider a revised Coast Guard reauthorization bill (HR 2838) and a bill enabling the U.S. to host the 34th Americas Cup (HR 3321). The chamber will be in recess next week.

The Senate did not meet today. When the chamber reconvenes on Monday, November 7, it will first consider legislation to repeal a law that requires the federal government to withhold three percent of most payments made to government contractors (H.R. 674). Thereafter, the chamber is expected to consider a second FY12 appropriations “minibus” (see item below). Senate Republicans also plan to bring up resolutions of disapproval to block implementation of the Federal Communications Commission “net neutrality” rules (S.J. Res. 6) and the Environmental Protection Agency rule on cross-state power plant emissions (S.J. Res. 27).

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

SENATE APPROVES FIRST FY12 “MINIBUS” AND PREPS FOR SECOND  UPDATED

On November 1, the Senate approved by a vote of 69 to 30 an FY12 appropriations “minibus,” which includes three of the 12 FY12 appropriations bills: Agriculture, Transportation-Housing, and Commerce-Justice-Science. The latter bill includes funding for the National Science Foundation and NASA.

Senate leaders are readying a second minibus for consideration next week, which will combine the FY12 Energy-Water (H.R. 2354), Financial Services (S. 1573), and State-Foreign Operations (S. 1601) appropriations bills.
The House-Senate conference on the first minibus began on November 3, which CQ.com says is “the first conference committee on a spending measure in two years.” House Appropriations Committee Chair Harold Rogers (R-KY) hopes to have a completed conference report by the week of November 14, when the House returns to session. Democratic and Republican conferees are so certain of being able to reach agreement by the end of next week on the first minibus, reports the publication, they may add to the package two relatively non-controversial FY12 spending bills: Homeland Security and Legislative Branch.

Conferes on the minibus also likely will add a new continuing resolution (CR) to the package to keep the government funded through mid-December, beyond the November 18 expiration of the current CR.

Helping move the conference forward, reports Politico, is the fact that House Republicans have indicated that they will support the funding levels agreed to last August in the Budget Control Act, which provided $24 billion more in FY12 spending than the House approved earlier in the year (though $7 billion below FY11 levels). Politico says that conferees on the Commerce-Justice-Science portion of the FY12 minibus have a discretionary spending target of $52.7 billion to work with, which is the same as the Senate-approved level and $2.35 billion above the House level approved in June.

--Senate-Passed Bill Contains Committee-Approved Funding for NSF, NASA

In the process of approving several amendments to the FY12 appropriations minibus, the Senate made no changes to funding levels approved by the Appropriations Committee for the National Science Foundation (NSF) or NASA. The Commerce-Justice-Science bill (S. 1572), approved by the Committee on September 15, would cut the NSF budget by $162 million, or 2.4 percent, and the NASA budget by $509 million, or 2.8 percent. (See AAU Weekly Wrap-up, September 16, 2011, for additional details.)

AAU, APLU SEND LETTER TO CONFEREES ON FY12 NSF, NASA FUNDING

AAU and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) sent a letter to House and Senate appropriators on November 2 urging them to sustain support for the four research agencies funded through the FY12 Commerce-Justice-Science appropriations bill included in the Senate-passed “minibus.” The four agencies are NSF, NASA, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

For NSF, the letter asks conferees to fund NSF at its FY11 level of $6.86 billion, which is the same as the House FY12 level and $162 million more than the Senate-approved level. For NASA, the two associations request $5.1 billion for the space agency’s Science Mission Directorate, $637 million for Space Technology, and $570 million for Aeronautics.

Regarding the James Webb Space Telescope, the letter expresses “confidence you and your staff will work through differences to appropriate a level of funding allowing for the completion and launch of the telescope,” but asks that an appropriations firewall be placed between FY12 funding for the telescope and the Science Mission Directorate.

ONE HUNDRED MEMBERS URGE DEFICIT COMMITTEE TO “GO BIG” NEW
A bipartisan group of 100 House Members sent a letter to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction on November 2 urging the committee to “go big” and propose a major deficit-reduction plan. The letter, spearheaded by Reps. Heath Shuler (D-NC) and Mike Simpson (R-ID), said that “all options for mandatory and discretionary spending and revenues must be on the table,” and urged the panel to aim for $4 trillion in deficit reduction, rather than the $1.2 trillion required under the Budget Control Act.

ORGANIZATIONS ASK DEFICIT COMMITTEE TO SUPPORT RESEARCH INVESTMENTS

A group of 70 higher education associations, universities, and scientific groups, including AAU, wrote to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction on October 28 asking the panel to identify federal research and development as an area of U.S. investment “too critical to be cut.”

The letter, led by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said:

“Science and discovery are important aspects of the American national character. American ingenuity is still the best reason for long-term optimism about the U.S. economy and the well-being of its people. An effective path out of the current difficulties should include investments in R&D. They can fuel our future growth and prosperity.”

PETITION ON “SAVE STUDENT AID” GARNERS 47,000+ SIGNATURES

An online petition developed by the Student Aid Alliance to urge sustained federal funding for student aid has received about 47,000 signatures so far, and the list is growing. The petition, which will be sent soon to the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, notes that recent budget deals have already cut $30 billion from federal student aid programs, even as many states are cutting higher education programs in their own budgets. (The petition can also be accessed from the AAU homepage.) The petition adds:

“That’s why it’s more important than ever to preserve, protect and provide adequate funding for the core federal student aid programs—such as Pell Grants and student loan benefits. Together, these programs offer students an opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills our nation demands for a strong recovery.

Tough budget decisions in DC have put pressure on all federal spending, but cutting student aid, a long-term investment in our nation’s future, doesn’t make sense.”

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