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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House met today in pro forma session, with no votes. The Senate was in recess this week. The two chambers will reconvene Monday, January 21, for a joint session of Congress for the President’s inauguration. Legislative business will resume on Tuesday, January 22.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

OMB DIRECTS AGENCIES TO PREPARE FOR SEQUESTER, EXPIRING FY13 CR  UPDATED

The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has directed federal agencies to continue planning for possible major budget reductions in FY13 in case Congress fails to call off the across-the-board spending cuts, known as the sequester, now scheduled to go into effect on March 1, or to extend the current FY13 continuing resolution (CR) beyond its March 27 expiration date. A memorandum sent to federal agency heads by Acting OMB Director Jeff Zients on January 14 noted that unless Congress acts, the sequestration order will require spending cuts in FY13 alone of $85 billion. The memorandum did not address what agencies should do if Congress fails to raise the debt ceiling.

Among other guiding principles, the memorandum directed agencies to:

“…review grants and contracts to determine where cost savings may be achieved in a manner that is consistent with the applicable terms and conditions, remaining mindful of
the manner in which individual contracts or grants advance the core mission of the agency…”

The White House and Congress have yet to begin serious negotiations on either the sequester or the FY13 CR as they continue trading barbs over raising the debt ceiling, which may need to be acted on as early as mid-February to avoid government default, reports CQ Roll Call. President Obama has said he will not negotiate on the debt limit.

Although House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) asserted previously that any debt ceiling increase must be paired with equally large spending cuts, he and his House Republican colleagues are now taking a different tack on the debt ceiling. They announced today that the House will vote next week on a measure to raise the debt ceiling for three months, with a proviso that if either chamber fails to pass a budget resolution by April 15, Members of Congress would not be paid. Politico notes that the Democratic-controlled Senate has not passed a budget resolution in three years.

The fiscal cliff compromise enacted on January 2 delayed the sequester by two months and reduced the FY13 sequester level from $109 billion to $85 billion. The $24 billion cost of the postponement was “paid for” with $12 billion in spending cuts, divided evenly between defense and nondefense spending, and $12 billion in new revenue from allowing taxpayers to convert to Roth retirement plans. As discussed in an analysis by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the still-unresolved FY13 budget would absorb $4 billion of the spending cuts, while the FY14 budget would absorb the remaining $8 billion.

Thus, the actual reduction in the FY13 sequester amount would not be $24 billion, but $20 billion: $8 billion from spending cuts moved to FY14 and $12 billion from new revenues resulting from changes in the Roth retirement plan.

The FY13 CR has been funding agencies and programs at largely their FY12 levels because Congress has been unable to approve any of the 12 FY13 appropriations bills. Clearly, final funding levels will be affected by action on the sequester. Allowing the CR to expire on March 27 would trigger a government shutdown. It is unclear what government spending would be able to continue if the debt ceiling is not raised.

OTHER CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES

AAU ENDORSES HOUSE BILL ON GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION RESEARCH UPDATED

AAU has endorsed legislation introduced on January 16 by Representatives Ed Markey (D-MA) and Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and 31 other House Democrats that would eliminate a statutory restriction on research by scientific research agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which their press release says “has prohibited these agencies from conducting high-quality, peer-reviewed research on gun violence prevention.” The Firearm Safety and Public Health Research Act is intended to expand and codify the presidential memorandum issued on January 16 by the President as part of his broader package addressing gun violence. (See article below.)
Agencies within HHS, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), have been affected by a congressional prohibition on using federal money to advocate for or promote gun control. As pointed out in an article in Slate, the current statutory language may not specifically block research on gun violence, but it is broad enough to have given agency officials pause and to serve as a deterrent to researchers.

The AAU letter notes that the association’s executive committee recently issued a statement calling on the nation’s leaders to address gun violence and that such a response should “draw on the nation’s leading experts to craft effective responses.” AAU President Hunter Rawlings concludes in the letter to Rep. Markey, “We applaud your leadership to ensure that policy formation and evaluation will be informed by the best empirical evidence that peer-reviewed research can provide.”

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

PRESIDENT DIRECTS AGENCIES TO STUDY CAUSES OF GUN VIOLENCE

As part of a larger set of proposals aimed at reducing gun violence, President Obama on January 16 issued a presidential memorandum directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), through CDC and other scientific agencies within the Department, to conduct research into the causes and prevention of gun violence. The affected agencies include NIH.

The presidential memorandum says, in part: “The Secretary shall begin by identifying the most pressing research questions with the greatest potential public health impact, and by assessing existing public health interventions being implemented across the Nation to prevent gun violence.”

A White House fact sheet released earlier in the day provides additional information (page five):

“...END THE FREEZE ON GUN VIOLENCE RESEARCH, INVESTIGATE THE CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE, AND EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF VIOLENT MEDIA IMAGES AND VIDEO GAMES: For years, Congress has subjected the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to restrictions ensuring it does not “advocate or promote gun control,” and some members of Congress have claimed this restriction prohibits the CDC from conducting any research on the causes of gun violence. However, public health research on gun violence is not advocacy. The President is directing the CDC and other research agencies to conduct research into the causes and prevention of gun violence and the CDC is announcing that they will begin this research. The Administration is calling on Congress to provide $10 million for the CDC to conduct further research, including investigating the relationship between video games, media images, and violence.”

OTHER

TFAI PLANS CAPITOL HILL BRIEFING ON UPDATED COMPETITIVENESS BENCHMARKS REPORT
The Task Force on American Innovation (TFAI), in which AAU participates, has released a report on U.S. competitiveness that will be the focus of a Capitol Hill luncheon briefing on January 23.

The briefing, co-hosted by Congressional Research and Development Caucus co-chairs Reps. Rush Holt (D-NJ) and Frank Wolf (R-VA), will be held on Wednesday, January 23, 12:00-1:30 p.m., in Room B-338 Rayburn House Office Building. Those interested in attending may register online here or RSVP to SmithRJ@asme.org.

The session will feature discussion of the new report and perspectives on U.S. competitiveness in a number of key areas relating to science and research, including the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) workforce, energy, and manufacturing indicators. Brian Raymond of the National Association of Manufacturers will serve as moderator, and Edward Swallow of Northrop Grumman Information Systems, Ian Steff of the Semiconductor Industry Association, and Bill Bonvillian of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology will comment on the report.

The report, “American Exceptionalism, American Decline? Research, the Knowledge Economy, and the 21st Century Challenge,” is the third installment in a series of TFAI reports that benchmark U.S. competitiveness in certain science and engineering indicators. The first report, in 2005, found that, “The United States still leads the world in research and discovery, but our advantage is rapidly eroding, and our global competitors may soon overtake us.” The 2006 update expanded the benchmarks and found a continuation of these disturbing trends.

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