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Agencies Operating Under a Continuing Resolution
The new fiscal year started on October 1, and only two funding bills have been signed into law, Defense and Homeland Security. The remaining bills, including the one that funds NSF, NASA and NOAA, won’t be finalized until after the elections, when Congress will return to a lame-duck session to complete their work on Monday, November 13. Agencies must operate at FY06 levels until the bills are finalized, which may not happen until Christmas – possibly not until after the first of the year. In the approved DOD spending bill, Congress reversed proposed cuts to Defense research, which will squeeze discretionary dollars for the other agencies.

It is unclear if the remaining appropriations bills will be passed as stand-alone bills, or combined into an “omnibus” bill. The last time funding bills were passed separately was FY 2002.

Deputy Administrator of NOAA Nominated
Last month the White House announced its nominee for Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and deputy administrator of NOAA. Jane Luxton, a corporate lawyer, is currently a partner at King and Spalding, LLP. Her practice focuses on the “regulation of metals and chemicals under federal and state environmental law, as well as international environmental regulation.” If confirmed, she would replace Jim Mahoney, who retired last spring. As deputy to NOAA Administrator, she would oversee the day-to-day operations of the agency. It is unclear whether she would act as director for the U.S. Climate Change Science Program. Currently, the acting director of CCSP is Commerce Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bill Brennan, NOAA’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Affairs.

GAO Report and Hearing on NOAA’s Weather Satellite Program
Before Congress broke for recess last month, the House Science Committee held a hearing on a new GAO report on NOAA’s acquisition of the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite series (GOES-R), the next generation of the multi-billion dollar weather satellite system. In an effort to avoid massive cost overruns, Congress is closely following the GOES-R procurement to avoid the problems faced by the other weather satellite project, NPOESS. To date, cost estimates for GOES-R have risen from $6.2 billion to $11 billion. At his final hearing before retiring, Chairman Boehlert read in his opening statement, “The polar satellite program, NPOESS, was entirely out of whack – over budget, behind schedule, losing capability and grossly mismanaged…I am happy to say that it appears NOAA has indeed been learning from its mistakes and I want to compliment Admiral Lautenbacher for that.”
Witnesses at this hearing were NOAA Administrator, Conrad Lautenbacher, and David Powner, Director of Information Technology Management Issues, U.S. Government Accountability Office.


The webcast of this hearing is up on the House Science Committee website at: http://www.house.gov/science/hearings/full06/Sept%2029/index.htm

**Major Hurricane Initiative Proposed**

Last month, the National Science Board, an independent advisory body to the president and Congress on matters of national science and engineering policy, released a draft report, Hurricane Warning: The Critical Need for a National Hurricane Research Initiative. The report warns that the federal investment in hurricane science and engineering is insufficient, given the enormous costs and suffering caused by hurricanes. The public is invited to provide comments on the report until Sunday, October 29. Email comments to NSBHSE@nsf.gov.

Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL), along with cosponsors Mary Landrieu (D-LA), David Vitter (R-LA), and Bill Nelson (D-FL), introduced S. 4005, the “National Hurricane Research Initiative (NHRI) Act of 2006,” which charges NOAA and NSF to craft specific strategies for implementing and overseeing the NHRI. The bill sets out specific goals for NHRI research including predicting hurricane intensification, storm surge, rainfall, and inland flooding, improved observations, assessment of vulnerable infrastructure, interaction of hurricanes with engineered structures, improved computational ability, improved disaster response and recovery, and evacuation planning. The proposal also would establish a National Infrastructure Data Base in order to provide a baseline for developing standards, measuring modification and loss, and establishing public policy to better understand hurricanes and tropical storms.

The bill is available at: 
http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109_cong_bills&docid=f:s4005is.txt.pdf

This bill won’t be advanced this Congress, but a version of it will most likely be introduced next year.

**Senate Competitiveness Bill Introduced**

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-MN) and Minority Harry Reid (D-NV), along with almost 40 cosponsors, introduced S. 3936, the “National Competitiveness Investment Act” late last month. This bill includes many of the provisions in three Senate bills (Protecting America's Competitive Edge) introduced early this year – “Pace-Energy, “PACE-Education” and “PACE-Finance.” This bill doubles authorization levels for DOE’s Office of Science, NSF and NSF’s education programs. It adds NASA as a full participant in interagency activities such as the American Competitiveness Initiative, and establishes a NOAA/NSF coordinated program of ocean and atmospheric R&D.

While it is highly unlikely it will pass this year, this bill is now positioned to move forward in the 110th Congress.