

## Ehlers to Replace 50-Year-Old National Science Policy

Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.) plans to produce a document that will guide the decisions of lawmakers and government officials in determining what science programs the government should pursue. House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisc.), the chair of the House Science Committee, assigned the task to Ehlers, who was a nuclear physicist before he entered politics.

Ehlers envisions the policy document as a replacement for "Science—The Endless Frontier," a seminal report that was submitted in 1945 to then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt by Vannevar Bush, director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. That report laid the groundwork for the massive postwar expansion of the federal government's role in science and engineering, including the formation of the National Science Foundation.

Bush's report said that basic research in science was essential for the United States's future economic and military security and argued for large investments in research and education. It said that the government should allow scientists wide latitude in picking the topics of their research, even when they were using government funds to do the work.

"That was a marvelous guide for post-war science, but it's not particularly helpful any more," Ehlers said of the Bush report. The world is a very different place than it was when Bush wrote. Ehlers said that the Cold War has ended, and the fed-

eral budget is getting tighter rather than expanding. Moreover, science has changed tremendously since 1945, with the rise of international collaborations and large-scale scientific endeavors.

"I think it's a time for a good review of our nation's science policy," Ehlers said. The policy will try to sort out the purposes of scientific research and lay out a framework for policymakers and lawmakers to set priorities among competing projects, he said.

According to Ehlers, the government is rudderless when it comes to science, with no attempt to establish overarching directions for science in the nation. "Currently we don't have a science policy. We have a budget policy, and we just argue each year over how much money we're going to spend on each project," he said. In that sense, the nation treats science just as it treats deciding which proposed dams to build and which to reject, with as little thought to the underlying rationale for federal support of science, he said.

"Rep. Ehlers' background and years of experience as a physicist and educator make him uniquely qualified to assist me and the entire [Science] Committee in reaching out to the science community," Sensenbrenner said.

Ehlers said he hasn't yet decided what form his report will take, when it will be produced or even exactly what process will go into producing it. He expects to start with "round table discussions" with scientific groups and other interested parties to begin identifying themes that the report could sound. He plans to follow

the example of Gingrich's four-step paradigm for leadership: "listen, learn, help and lead," and try to understand others' concerns before reaching any conclusions about the report's recommendations. "I certainly welcome any comments from any of the scientific societies," said Ehlers, whose electronic mail address on Capitol Hill is rep.ehlers@mail.house.gov.

His goal is to produce a policy blueprint that the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the President will all support. "This is not in any way an attempt to be us-versus-them," he said.

But he said that his training as a scientist and his experience as a lawmaker make him uniquely qualified to serve as a bridge between the scientific establishment and government—and far better qualified than an interested layperson would be. "Would you want an interested layperson being chair of the Federal Reserve instead of Alan Greenspan?"

Ehlers' project comes at a time when scientific groups increasingly are worried about sluggish government spending on science. For example, in its analysis of the Clinton administration's 1998 budget proposal, the American Association for the Advancement of Science concludes that the budget calls for government spending on science to drop by 14% once inflation is taken into account. Further cuts in scientific research seem likely in the lean years ahead. And someone will have to decide where to cut. Ehlers said, "I hope to come up with a document that will be helpful in deciding the priorities."

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