Leadership needed to save breeder, NASA

by Marsha Freeman

The House Committee on Science and Technology passed a budget amendment on May 7 killing the Clinch River Breeder program (CRBR) and seriously undermining the Reagan administration's stated commitment to a reinvigorated nuclear energy development program. The decision is a slap at the President directly, and at Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), in whose state Clinch River is located. Ronald Reagan himself, during the presidential election campaign last August, had pledged his own support for the Clinch River Breeder Reactor.

The defeat of the CRBR was apparently the result of an alliance between antinuclear Democrats like Richard Ottinger (N.Y.), indiscriminate GOP budget-cutters, and freshman congressmen who had been bamboozled into voting research and development programs like CRBR out of existence. The defeat of the United States' only large-scale program for development of a commercially feasible liquid metal fast breeder reactor would put the nation years behind the Soviet Union and France in this technology. The breeder is important because it produces more fuel than it consumes, assuring a greatly expanded supply of uranium fuel to power conventional reactors.

The next chance to restore the budget cuts for the breeder and other advanced technology programs will come when the Senate begins its own markups. It is hoped that the administration, and the progrowth Democrats and Republicans in Congress, will exercise leadership to reinstate the programs cut, and begin to reverse the decline of America's technological leadership.

Paring down R&D

The committee decision to kill the breeder is part of the larger attack on basic R&D, cuts in NASA's funding, including the fifth orbiter in the Space Shuttle program, the Spacelab, and reinstatement of solar energy programs and some fossil-fuel energy conservation measures.

In the latest round of jockeying over the Reagan budget, the subcommittee on Energy Research and Production, chaired by Rep. Marilyn Bouquard (D-Tenn.), had attempted to add funds onto the $460 million Reagan budget request for fusion and advanced nuclear programs, cut down from the $525 million originally requested by the Carter administration. The subcommittee added $14.7 million for fusion, $40 million for the high-temperature gas-cooled reactor (HTGR)—which had been cut out completely—and added funds for the cleanup of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant.

But House Science and Technology Committee Chairman Don Fuqua (D-Fla.), in a meeting with all the subcommittee chairmen, negotiated a compromise with "soft technology" advocates that took out $191 million for nuclear programs in the budget request marked up by Bouquard's subcommittee, and added $109 million to solar, energy conservation, and fossil fuels programs. As the final blow, the $225 million that was authorized for the Clinch River breeder was terminated on the basis that fiscal constraints could not justify spending the money on the breeder program.

The irony is that, in their fervor to make sure that appropriations stay in line with OMB Director David Stockman's irresponsible budget, the congressmen have failed to realize that it will cost more in FY 1982 to terminate Clinch River than to proceed with construction. For example, equipment costs that would have been spread out over years will now have to be paid off in one chunk to industrial suppliers.

Outcutting Carter

Such a lack of foresight has permeated the whole budget-making process. There has been a lack of leadership on the part of senior Republican congressmen who are ostensibly committed to carrying out the Reagan administration's pledges to revitalize the U.S. nuclear program and proceed with development of its fusion program. Even such pronuclear, prodevelopment congressmen as Sen. Harrison Schmitt (R-N.M.), Representative Bouquard, and Representative Fuqua have capitulated to the notion that cutting the budget, thus decreasing the possibilities for economic recovery through increased industrial production and scientific research, will somehow stem inflation.

The result has been a science budget that makes the bare-bones Carter budget look opulent. For example, the NASA budget under Carter was to be increased in FY 1981 by 22 percent, up to $6.7 billion. Stockman will authorize no more than $6.1 billion, on the basis that the United States cannot "afford" long-term research and development programs—and this despite the recent successful launching of the Space Shuttle. Other programs, like the NASA Project Galileo planetary flyby and joint NASA-European Space Agency Solar Polar Mission, appear to be doomed before they ever get off the drawing board.