



The COMPETES Eagle Has Landed – Where are we?

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With all the political drama that played out in the past few weeks with respect to the passage of the America COMPETES authorization legislation for funding the nation's key scientific research agencies, there seems to have been at least one thing that was missing from the debate -- if we can be generous enough to call what transpired a debate. After having sailed through committee hearings with little resistance to the substance of the bill, opposition on the House floor came as something of a surprise. Objections to the bill were largely a function of party affiliation. Those against the bill focused on the level of spending being authorized as too high. There was also displeasure at the creation of several new programs that were not part of the 2007 COMPETES Act. A final blow was an objection raised to the authorization being for a 5 year period rather than the 3 years of the original COMPETES Act.

Rather than tackle the cause of science directly, the Republican opposition resorted to a series of procedural and tactical approaches to revising COMPETES into something that they found more palatable. There were also a series of amendments offered that had nothing to do with the main thrust of the bill. Most notable of these was the 'Internet porn' component that was added to the bill. All of this led to a move to recommit the bill to the committee for further consideration and revisions that would yield a package that would pass on the floor of the House.

Throughout all this there seemed to be little if any attention being paid to the meat of the bill. Indeed, with so much fuss about the procedural tactics employed in preventing the bill's passage, all reference to the authorizing functions seem to have gotten lost. What happened next, much to the surprise of many Capitol Hill observers. After submitting an alternate version of the original bill, this being HR 5235, the Committee, under Bart Gordon's leadership, resubmitted HR 5116 in essentially its original form, accepting limited amendments to take into account certain elements that prevented passage of the bill in its earlier incarnation.

This got to the floor of the House on the afternoon of May 28 and passed on a party line vote with a handful of Republicans voting in favor of the bill. Just before 2:00 P.M., it was announced that the House would resume its consideration of H.R. 5116 – the original bill with the five-year authorization period. Following brief floor procedures, Gordon moved what is called "a division of the question." This procedure allows House Members to vote on each part of the amendments contained in the Motion to Recommit that had stalled the bill before. Each of these was put to a vote, recorded or voice, and this process ultimately led to taking a vote on the entire bill that passed handily, 262 to 150.

So the COMPETES Eagle has landed. But with all the sturm and drang involved in getting the Bill to the floor in a form that would pass, we were left to ask what is in the bill that was passed? Or as we state in our headline; we have landed, but where are we?

To find out, we took a quick look at the actual funding components of the final version of the bill. We were pleasantly surprised at what we found. This bill appears to contain the bulk of the original language of HR 5116 in its unamended form and added to that the all-important prohibitions on NSF employees viewing Internet pornography on the job.

Gone are the amendments requiring flat funding of the COMPETES agencies until the Federal budget is balanced. Also surviving is the provision championed by Chairman Gordon to create a five-year, rather than a three-year, authorization window. Agency funding details appear in the following table.