

Positive news for particle physics



Photo: Reidar Hehn, Fermilab

The high-energy physics community suffered a battering in 2008. The omnibus bill passed by Congress in late 2007 sharply reduced funding, causing layoffs at Stanford Linear Accelerator Center and furloughs at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. Various projects were put on ice for the year, or closed prematurely. Those cuts hit hard and left physicists reeling.

During those most difficult times, however, the community continued to make the case for particle physics research. Through the P5 process (see page 10), it worked with the Department of Energy and the National Science Foundation to develop a strategic plan for the future, designed to provide options for funding agencies under four potential funding scenarios.

Panel members needed to make some tough decisions but ultimately developed a compelling road map for US particle physics to make significant scientific advances with a balanced and sustainable program of research.

Then, just as Fermilab was preparing to lay off workers, Congress stepped in. Lawmakers appropriated an additional \$32 million for high-energy physics, directed to prevent the imminent layoffs at Fermilab, allow the NOvA neutrino experiment to proceed, and preserve critical accelerator R&D and computing at SLAC.

Notably, the House Appropriation Committee's language in its draft budget documents for FY09 reads: "The Committee commends the Department [of Energy] for its efforts to engage the high energy physics scientific community to provide a bold vision for the future of the Nation's efforts in this area that is both realistic and scientifically compelling, particularly given the difficult budget constraints faced by the field in fiscal year 2008.

"...the Committee believes that a balanced effort that addresses opportunities at the energy, luminosity, and cosmic frontiers by leveraging existing physical capital and facilities to the maximum extent possible and by engaging in international scientific cooperation is critical for the future of this field."

In early July, Fermilab celebrated the news at an event with Congressional, DOE, and laboratory representatives and a newly uplifted Fermilab staff.

Budget challenges remain, but with a new plan and the backing of the Department of Energy and Congress, the future of high-energy physics in the United States is now looking much more positive than it did in the first half of 2008.

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