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Brazil’s science budget is rebounding. So why aren’t scientists celebrating?

Major hike would support high-profile infrastructure projects—if the Bolsonaro government releases the money

BY HERTON ESCOBAR

Scientists in Brazil started 2022 with a piece of good news. This year’s federal research budget is more than double last year’s—a major turnaround after 7 years of steep cuts. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation will have about 6.9 billion reais ($1.27 billion) for discretionary investments this year, a 110% increase from 2021, according to figures provided by the ministry.

The hike—the result of intense lobbying by scientists in Congress to end a freeze on a key funding source—will help support high-profile infrastructure projects such as the construction of Brazil’’ first biosafety level four laboratory—for research on deadly viruses—and the expansion of Sirius, a new-generation synchrotron light source that has been operational since 2020 but with only six of its 14 projected research stations completed. (The biosafety lab will be built next door to Sirius at the Brazilian Center for Research in Energy and Materials in Campinas.)

“The 2022 budget marks a turning point in public investment in science and technology and will bring new horizons and lasting benefits to the scientific community,” the ministry, headed by former astronaut Marcos Pontes, wrote in an email to Science.

But scientists are not celebrating yet. The increase barely compensates for savage budget cuts that began in 2015, and additional political maneuvering could mean the money never materializes. The federal budget is “a labyrinth” with many trap doors and hidden passages, says Glauco Arbix, a science policy expert at the University of São Paulo’s main campus who held government appointments in two previous administrations. “There are plenty of reasons to be wary.”

If the new money comes through, it will provide “a bit of oxygen for a dying patient,” says pharmacologist Soraya Soubhi Smaili, former rector of the Federal University of São Paulo, “but we are still in a critical situation.” Even with the hike, funding for key federal agencies that scientists and universities rely on for research remain far below their pre-2015 levels, she notes. Taking inflation into account, total investment in R&D by Brazil’s federal government shrunk by 37% between 2013 and 2020, even as the country’s scientific community continued to grow, according to economist Fernanda De Negri of the Institute for Applied Economic Research.

Most of the additional money will come from the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development (FNDCT), thanks to a law approved in early 2021 that forbids the government from freezing those funds, as it did in previous years. But scientists are skeptical about President Jair Bolsonaro’s willingness to pay up. He vetoed the bill and withheld more than 2.6 billion reais in FNDCT funds last year, even after Congress overturned his veto. “Just because there’s money in the budget doesn’t mean it will be spent,” Arbix says. The only reason the government included that money in the budget “is because it was legally forced to do so,” adds physicist Ildeu Moreira, former president of the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC) and a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, who was a key player in getting the FNDCT protection bill approved by Congress. “That’s a victory we can celebrate.”

Although FNDCT is under the science ministry’s budget umbrella, how the funds are spent is up to a large council composed of multiple government agencies and ministries that has largely ignored scientists during the Bolsonaro administration. The piece of the ministry’s discretionary budget that falls outside FNDCT is 2.3 billion reais, a marginal increase from what it had in 2021.

The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Brazil’s top funding agency, will also depend heavily on the release of FNDCT funds to supplement its meager research budget of 35.5 million reais. And that is “far from guaranteed,” says Renato Janine Ribeiro, president of SBPC and a professor of political philosophy at the University of São Paulo, São Paulo. He recalls what happened in August 2021: In a much-awaited announcement, CNPq launched its first universal call for research grant applications since 2018, counting on 200 million reais from FNDCT. Only half of that money was eventually released in late December—2 months after the predicted date and under heavy pressure from scientists.

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Government officials insist the money will come through this year. The FNDCT board of directors has already approved “an investment plan with more than 110 projects that are ready for execution this year and will receive the amounts as the funds are released,” the ministry wrote to Science in its email. “Making resources available for scientific research is one of the ministry’s priorities.”

But Bolsonaro has taken strongly antiscientific positions in his health and environmental policies including his opposition to vaccinating children against COVID-19. And although he will seek a second term in the October presidential election, scientists doubt that will make him more likely to boost science spending. “Science and technology don’t win votes here,” says agronomist Edward Madureira, former rector at the Federal University of Goiás, Goiânia.

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