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Small Business Innovation Research Program

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Summary

In 1982, the Small Business Innovation Development Act (P.L. 97-219) established Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) programs within the major federal research and development (R&D) agencies designed to increase participation of small innovative companies in federally funded R&D. Government agencies with R&D budgets of $100 million or more are required to set aside a portion of these funds to finance the SBIR activity. Over $20.7 billion in awards have been made for more than 94,660 projects. Extended several times, the program is currently scheduled to sunset on September 30, 2008. On April 23, 2008, H.R. 5819, a bill to reauthorize the SBIR program through 2010 and make changes to the effort, passed the House. For information on SBIR reauthorization activity in the 110th Congress see CRS Report RS22865, *The Small Business Innovation Research Program: Reauthorization Efforts*, by Wendy H. Schacht.

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Program Description

The Small Business Innovation Research program is designed to increase the participation of small, high technology firms in the federal R&D endeavor. Congressional support for the initiative was predicated upon the belief that while technology-based companies under 500 employees tended to be highly innovative, and innovation is essential to the economic well-being of the United States, these businesses were under represented in government R&D activities. Agency SBIR programs guarantee this sector a portion of the government's R&D budget to compensate for what was viewed as a preference for contracting with large firms.

Current law requires that every federal department with an R&D budget of $100 million or more establish and operate an SBIR program. A set percentage of that agency's applicable extramural research and development budget—originally at 1.25%, now at 2.5%—is to be used to support mission-related work in small companies.

The objectives of the SBIR program include stimulation of technological innovation in the small business sector, increased use of this community to meet the government's R&D needs, additional involvement of minority and disadvantaged individuals in the process, and expanded commercialization of the results of federally funded R&D. To achieve this, agency SBIR efforts involve a three-phase activity. In the first phase, awards up to $100,000 (for six months) are provided to evaluate a concept's scientific or technical merit and feasibility. The project must be of interest to and coincide with the mission of the supporting organization. Projects that demonstrate potential after the initial endeavor may compete for Phase II awards of up to $750,000 (lasting one-two years) to perform the principal R&D. Phase III funding, directed at the commercialization of the product or process, is expected to be generated in the private sector. Federal dollars may be used if the government perceives that the final technology or technique will meet public needs. P.L. 102-564 directed agencies to weigh commercial potential as an additional factor in evaluating SBIR proposals.

As of FY2006, 11 departments have SBIR programs including the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense (DOD), Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Transportation; the Environmental Protection Agency; the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Each agency's SBIR activity reflects that organization's management style. Individual departments select R&D interests, administer program operations, and control financial support. Funding can be disbursed in the form of contracts, grants, or cooperative agreements. Separate agency solicitations are issued at established times.

The Small Business Administration (SBA) created broad policy and guidelines under which individual departments operate SBIR programs. The agency monitors and reports to Congress on the conduct of the separate departmental activities. Criteria for eligibility in the SBIR program include companies that are independently owned and operated; not dominant in the field of research proposed; for profit; the employer of 500 or less people; the primary employer of the principal investigator; and at least 51% owned by one or more U.S. citizens or lawfully admitted permanent resident aliens. A rule change, effective January 3, 2005, permits subsidiaries of SBIR-eligible companies to participate as long as the parent company meets all SBIR requirements.

A pilot effort to encourage commercialization of university and federal laboratory R&D by small companies was created by P.L. 102-564 and reauthorized several times through FY2009. The Small Business Technology Transfer program (STTR) provides funding for research proposals that are developed and executed cooperatively between a small firm and a scientist in a research organization and fall under the mission requirements of the federal funding agency. Up to $100,000 in Phase I financing is available for one year; Phase II awards of up to $750,000 may be made for two years. Currently funded by a set-aside of 0.3% of the extramural R&D budget of departments that spend over $1 billion per year on this effort, the Departments of Energy, Defense, and Health and Human Services, NASA, and NSF participate in the STTR program.

Implementation

The Government Accountability Office (GAO; formerly the General Accounting Office) is legislatively directed to assess the implementation of the Small Business Innovation Development Act, as amended, and has issued a series of reports documenting its findings. A 1987 study found that both the evaluation and selection processes were sufficient to "reasonably" insure awards were based on technical merit. It was also determined that the majority of agencies were not awarding Phase I grants and contracts within the six-month time frame required by the SBA guidelines. Another GAO report the following month surveyed the participants and noted that most were "generally satisfied" with the administration of SBIR programs.

In 1989, GAO reported that agency heads found the SBIR effort to be beneficial and met the organization's R&D needs. Most indicated that the "... SBIR programs had developed new research areas, placed more emphasis on the application of research results, and led to wider use of small businesses as research performers." The study concluded that projects were, for the most part, of high quality. At DOD and NASA, however, SBIR efforts stressed R&D to meet agency mission requirements in contrast to other SBIR programs that focused on commercialization for private sector markets. All of the departments stated that SBIR projects, when compared with other research activities, had greater potential to result in new products and processes.

Testimony presented by GAO in 1991 stated that the program "clearly is doing what Congress asked it to do in achieving commercial sales and developmental funding from the private sector." An SBA study found that approximately one in four SBIR projects will result in the sale of new commercial products or processes. Another GAO report issued in May 1992 noted that despite a short time frame and the fact that many SBIR projects had not had sufficient time to mature into marketable technologies and techniques, "the program is showing success in Phase III activity." As of July 1991, almost two-thirds of the projects already had sales or received additional funding (primarily from the private sector) totaling approximately $1.1 billion.

The 1992 study also identified several issues for possible further congressional exploration. According to GAO, DOD placed less emphasis on commercialization than other agencies and utilized the SBIR program primarily to address the department's R&D needs. Questions were raised about the requirements for competitive bidding when companies looked to federal departments for Phase III contracts after successfully completing Phases I and II. GAO noted that clarification of the Competition in Contracting Act of 1984 (as amended) might be necessary. In addition, there was disagreement over whether the federal agency or the small firm should continue to work on technology development after the cessation of SBIR project funding. GAO also concluded that firms receiving multiple Phase II awards tended to have lower Phase III sales and less additional developmental support. The reasons for this remained unclear, but the

suggestion was made that these companies may have focused on securing funds through SBIR awards rather than through commercialization of their R&D results.

A March 1995 GAO report found that multiple Phase II funding had become a problem, particularly at NSF, NASA, and DOD. Among the reasons cited were the failure of companies to identify identical proposals made elsewhere in violation of the mandatory certification procedure; uncertainty in definitions and guidelines concerning "similar" research; and lack of interagency mechanisms to exchange information on projects. Several recommendations were made to address duplication. GAO testimony presented in March 1996 indicated that the SBA had taken steps to implement these suggestions. The study also determined that the quality of research appeared to have "kept pace" with the program's expansion, although it was still too early to make a definitive judgment. Factors supporting this assessment included the substantive level of competition, more proposals deemed meritorious than could be funded by agencies, and appraisals by departmental SBIR personnel indicating the high quality of submissions.

Another GAO study, released in April 1998, noted that between 35% and 50% of SBIR projects had resulted in sales or additional private sector investment. Despite earlier indications of problems associated with multiple award winners, this report found that such firms have similar commercialization rates as single awardees. Critical technology lists were being used to determine agency solicitations and there was little evidence of participation by foreign firms. While several agencies had new programs to assure continuity in funding, there were indications of possible inaccuracies in defining the extramural R&D budgets upon which the set-aside is based.

The June 1999 GAO analysis reported that SBIR awards tend to be concentrated both geographically and by firm despite widespread participation in the program. "The 25 most frequent winners, which represent fewer than 1 percent of the companies in the program, received about 11 percent of the program's awards from fiscal year 1983 through fiscal year 1997." Businesses in a small number of states, particularly California and Massachusetts, were awarded the most number of projects. The study also noted that while commercial potential is considered by all agencies, each has developed different evaluation approaches. Other goals, including innovation and responsiveness to agency mission, still remain important in determining awards.

A more recent report by GAO (June 2005) found that it is still difficult to adequately "assess the performance of the SBIR program" although the effort appears to be achieving its goal of "enhanced" participation of small business in the R&D enterprise. Utilizing "commercialization" as a measure may not be sufficient because other agency goals were being met such as research needs or expanded innovation. Success in the commercial market did not take into account the R&D requirements of departments like DOD or NASA. In a report the following year (October 2006), GAO noted that the agencies reporting to the SBA did not always provide the necessary data in the format required by SBA. GAO concluded that the "agencies need to strengthen [their] efforts to improve the completeness, consistency, and accuracy of awards data."

GAO also has evaluated the STTR program. A January 1996 report found that, in general, federal agencies favorably rated the quality of winning proposals (in the first year) and that most projects had commercial potential, although the costs might be high. The government had taken steps to avoid potential conflicts of interest between federal laboratories and departmental headquarters. There was no indication that this pilot effort was competing for proposals with the established SBIR activity or "reducing the quality of the agencies' R&D in general." Instead it was credited for encouraging collaborative work. Yet, GAO noted that because the programs are so similar,

there are questions whether or not a separate activity is necessary. Any real evaluation of success in technology transfer, however, could not be accomplished for several years because of the time needed to bring the results of R&D to the commercial marketplace. These findings were reiterated in testimony given by GAO in May and September 1997.

A June 2001 GAO study of all companies which received STTR awards between FY1995 and FY1997 noted the participant's belief that both the firms and the research institutions contributed to expanded R&D although the private sector was more influential in determining the direction of the research. The companies "...reported about $132 million in total sales and about $53 million in additional developmental funding." They identified 41 new patents and the creation of 12 new spin-off firms. Further, the awardees preferred that the STTR program remain separate from the SBIR activity.

Awards

From its inception in FY1983 through FY2006, over 94,660 awards have been made totaling more than $20.7 billion. **Table 1** summarizes the funding and the number of projects selected for the SBIR program as provided by the SBA; information on the STTR program is contained in **Table 2**.

Table 1. SBIR Program: Dollars Awarded and Projects Funded

Fiscal Year	Dollars Awarded (millions)			Awards		
	Phase I	Phase II	Total	Phase I	Phase II	Total[a]
FY1983	44.5	—	44.5	686	—	686
FY1984	48.0	60.4	108.4	999	338	1,337
FY1985	69.1	130.0	199.1	1,397	407	1,804
FY1986	98.5	199.4	297.9	1,945	564	2,509
FY1987	109.6	240.9	350.5	2,189	768	2,957
FY1988	101.9	284.9	389.1[a]	2,013	711	2,724
FY1989	107.7	321.7	431.9[a]	2,137	749	2,886
FY1990	118.1	341.8	460.7[a]	2,346	837	3,183
FY1991	127.9	335.9	483.1[a]	2,553	788	3,341
FY1992	127.9	371.2	508.4[a]	2,559	916	3,475
FY1993	154.0	490.7	698.0[a]	2,898	1,141	4,039
FY1994	220.4	473.6	717.6[a]	3,102	928	4,030
FY1995	232.1	601.9	834.1[a]	3,085	1,263	4,348
FY1996	228.9	645.8	916.3[a]	2,841	1,191	4,032
FY1997	277.6	789.1	1,106.7[a]	3,371	1,404	4,775
FY1998	262.3	804.4	1,066.7	3,022	1,320	4,342
FY1999	299.5	797.0	1,096.5	3,334	1,256	4,590
FY2000	302.0	888.2[b]	1,190.2	3,166	1,330	4,496

Fiscal Year	Dollars Awarded (millions)			Awards		
	Phase I	Phase II	Total	Phase I	Phase II	Total[a]
FY2001	317.1	977.3	1,294.4	3,215	1,533	4,748
FY2002	411.5	1,023.4[b]	1,434.9	4,243	1,577	5,820
FY2003	445.4	1,214.7	1,660.1	4,465	1,759	6,224
FY2004	498.7	1,368.7	1,867.4	4,638	2,013	6651
FY2005	461.2	1,404.7	1,865.9	4,300	1,871	6171
FY2006 (preliminary)	411.2	1,472.0	1,883.2	3,836	2,026	5,862

Source: Small Business Administration Data.

a. Includes modifications to previous awards and funds set aside for proposals in negotiation.

b. Dollars obligated can include modifications to previous year's awards.

Table 2. STTR Program: Dollars Awarded and Projects Funded

Fiscal Year	Dollars Awarded (millions)			Awards		
	Phase I	Phase II	Total	Phase I	Phase II	Total
FY1994	18.9	—	18.9	198	—	198
FY1995	23	10.7	33.7	238	22	260
FY1996	22.7	41.8	64.5	238	88	326
FY1997	24.2	44.9	69.1	260	89	349
FY1998	19.7	45.1	64.8	208	109	317
FY1999	24.3	40.6	64.9	251	78	329
FY2000	23.9	45.9	69.8	233	95	328
FY2001	24.2	53.2	77.4	224	113	337
FY2002	36.4	55.4	91.8	356	114	470
FY2003	41.1	50.7	91.8	397	111	508
FY2004	79.7	110.3	190	674	195	869
FY2005	73.9	146.4	220.3	611	221	832
FY2006 (preliminary)	74.0	152.3	226.3	644	234	878

Source: Small Business Administration data.

Issues for Consideration

Certain issues might be considered if the program is to be reauthorized. Initially, debate centered on the use of a set-aside: proponents urged its use to guarantee participation of small firms in federal R&D contracts while opponents argued that a set-aside interferes with normal market efficiency and circumvents the congressional budget process used to determine program priorities and budget allotments.

Existing regulations require at least 51% ownership by an individual or individuals. However, some experts argue participation by small firms that are majority-owned by venture capital companies should be permitted. Proponents of this change maintain that, particularly in the biotechnology sector, the most innovative companies are not able to use the SBIR program because they do not meet this ownership criteria. Opponents of altering the eligibility requirements argue that the program is designed to provide financial assistance where venture capital is not available. They assert that the program's objective is to bring new concepts to the point where private sector investment is feasible.

An additional concern is the extent to which program participants are mandated to report activities and results. P.L. 106-554 placed added requirements on companies to provide information; it remains to be determined if these requirements have been successfully implemented. Other issues that might be addressed include whether the problems identified by GAO associated with the duplication of awards has been adequately resolved. Are the SBIR and STTR programs meeting their different mandated objectives or are they serving an identical purpose? Does the focus on commercialization raise concerns by those who argue that the government has no role in directly supporting industrial research and development? These and other questions may be explored as the 110th Congress considers possible reauthorization of the Small Business Innovation Research program.

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