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## Budget ax hangs over Chicago research labs

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In a world where economic competitiveness hinges on innovation, our region can't afford any interruption or slowdown in the scientific research that leads to breakthrough technologies.

But the federal budget stalemate imperils cutting-edge work at the Chicago area's biggest scientific centers — **Fermilab** in Batavia, **Argonne National Laboratory** in Lemont and the University of Illinois' **National Center for Supercomputing Applications** in Champaign-Urbana.

Researchers at the two U.S. Energy Department labs and NCSA are racing scientists around the world to solve technical riddles in fields ranging from energy storage to cybersecurity. Those who find the solutions will open the door to entire new industries.

Past breakthroughs at these facilities include the technology underpinning the World Wide Web and magnetic resonance imaging. The economic spoils, in the form of jobs, investment and wealth creation, accrue disproportionately to the localities where the research takes place. Studies estimate the economic impact of Argonne and Fermilab in Illinois at more than \$1.3 billion annually.

Equally important, centers of scientific inquiry attract the kind of talent we need to compete in the knowledge-based economy. The labs' combined headcount of more than 5,000 includes leading scientists from around the world. We need more people like that.

Unfortunately, the labs face Damoclean funding cuts under **federal budget "sequestration"** if Washington can't resolve its budget impasse by the end of next month. Fermilab relies on the Department of Energy for virtually all its \$400 million operating budget, while Argonne gets about 90 percent of its \$800 million in operating funds from the feds. NCSA, meanwhile, taps National Science Foundation funding for important projects.

The extent of cuts at the labs won't be known until Congress completes the appropriations process between now and the end of March. But as a discretionary spending item that wasn't specifically exempted from sequestration, federal labs are fair

game for the budget ax. Current estimates peg likely reductions for the remainder of fiscal 2013 at about 9 percent for non-defense agencies like the labs.

“Funding cuts to DOE's basic science mission would be severe,” Energy Secretary Steven Chu warned earlier this month in a letter to Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D.-Md., who leads the Senate Appropriations Committee. Mr. Chu said sequestration would squeeze research funding, delay construction projects and generally curtail operations at DOE facilities around the country, including the national laboratories.

That would come on top of cuts Fermilab already has made as a result of President Barack Obama's proposed fiscal 2013 budget, which would reduce the lab's funding by 8 percent. In response, the lab eliminated 49 jobs, or about 3 percent of its staff.

Spokeswoman Katie Yurkewicz says that while “the situation is unclear right now,” Fermilab is “preparing for the possibility of additional cuts” in its federal funding.

It's hard to imagine how Fermi, Argonne and NCSA could avoid cutbacks if sequestration goes through and isn't reversed quickly.

This would be a blow to research and development in the Chicago area, which already is falling behind rivals in the U.S. and abroad. **The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning reported** yesterday that private-sector R&D spending declined here over the past decade, while it rose in other U.S. cities.

In recent months, local officials have shown **a new appreciation** for the role of basic research in fostering economic growth. The University of Illinois is planning a manufacturing lab and a high-tech research center along the lines of the old Bell Labs, both in Chicago. These are steps toward a prosperous future for Illinois and the nation. Mindless cuts at critical research facilities take us in the opposite direction.