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FEDERAL RESEARCH

Small Business Innovation
Research Program Shows
Success but Can Be
Strengthened

Statement of Jim Wells, Associate Director,
Energy Issues,
Resources, Community, and Economic
Development Division



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to discuss the results of our review of the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Program. The Small Business Innovation Development Act of 1982, which authorized the SBIR Program, emphasized the benefits of technological innovation and the ability of small businesses to transform research and development (R&D) results into new products. As part of its oversight of the SBIR Program, which is scheduled to expire in 1993, the Congress directed GAO to evaluate the aggregate commercial trends (primarily sales of products) in the third, or final, phase of the program. This phase of the program, which follows the developmental work of Phases I and II, is intended to pursue commercial or government applications of the SBIR technology. In response to this mandate, our full report was issued yesterday.¹

My discussion today summarizes the final results of our report. In addition, because the quality of SBIR research is a major factor in reviewing the program, we are including a brief discussion of our findings from the report that we released in January 1989.² You also asked us to discuss four issues relating to the program. These include (1) the question of whether the SBIR program has met the goals set out for it, (2) the reasons for minority and disadvantaged businesses' low level of Phase III activity, (3) the level of foreign investment and attention that has been attracted by SBIR awardees, and (4) changes that we would recommend to improve the program.

In summary, even though many SBIR projects have not yet had sufficient time to achieve their full commercial potential, the program is showing success in Phase III activity. As of July 1991, the SBIR Program had generated more than \$1.1 billion in Phase III activity related to two key indicators of the program's commercial trends--sales of products, processes, and services in Phase III and additional funding obtained for further technical development. The majority of sales and additional developmental funding came from the private sector, indicating that R&D projects funded by the SBIR Program are moving toward one of the program's key goals--increasing private-sector commercialization. Private-sector commercialization of SBIR-funded R&D is important not only as one of the key goals of the SBIR Program but also as part of a wider concern about U.S. competitiveness in a global economy and the transfer of federally funded technologies into the marketplace. In addition, in our January 1989 report, we found that the quality of SBIR research compared favorably with other federal research.

¹Federal Research: Small Business Innovation Research Shows Success but Can be Strengthened (GAO/RCED-92-37, Mar. 30, 1992)

²Federal Research: Assessment of Small Business Innovation Research Programs (GAO/RCED-89-39, Jan. 23, 1989).

Minority and disadvantaged businesses are achieving a lower level of activity than other companies in Phase III. The reasons for this difference are difficult to determine and need to be approached with caution because of the complexity of the SBIR Program. One observation is that businesses in this category received relatively fewer awards from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National Science Foundation (NSF), the two SBIR Programs that achieved the highest level of commercialization in their projects. In addition, these projects achieved a lower level of sales than other HHS and NSF projects. Although we examined other aspects of this issue, we found no further differences that might relate to the lower level of activity. For example, about two-thirds of all minority and disadvantaged business projects in our survey have remained active, similar to that for all the projects in our survey. In general, however, we want to emphasize that these observations are based only on those projects that responded to our survey and may be influenced by the limits of our survey.

Domestic companies and investors are playing a much greater role than foreign companies or investors in dealing with SBIR companies. Foreign buyouts have occurred very infrequently so far. Foreign participation in other types of business activity, such as licensing SBIR technologies for use overseas, is somewhat more evident but still well below that of U.S. involvement. As more companies develop their SBIR technologies and markets, they may become more attractive to other companies and investors, not only in the U.S. but overseas.

Although the program is showing success in Phase III (and even more is expected by the end of 1993), our report contains three matters for congressional consideration to further strengthen the program. These concern (1) the goal of increasing private-sector commercialization by directing DOD to place greater emphasis on commercialization, (2) the elimination of inconsistent practices in requiring competition for projects entering Phase III, and (3) the need to clarify the circumstances under which an agency may work on its own or continue working with the company through follow-on contracts after SBIR funding ends. A further issue is being addressed by the Small Business Administration. This issue deals with the lower performance (in terms of sales and additional developmental funding) by companies with five or more Phase II awards.

Before discussing our findings in more detail, let me provide some background concerning the SBIR Program and the approach that we took in conducting our survey of companies that participated in the program.

BACKGROUND

The Small Business Innovation Development Act established four goals for the SBIR Program: (1) to stimulate technological innovation, (2) to use small business to meet federal research and development (R&D) needs, (3) to foster and encourage participation by minority and disadvantaged persons in technological innovation, and (4) to increase private-sector commercialization derived from federal R&D.

Eleven federal agencies participate in the SBIR Program. Five of them--the Department of Defense (DOD), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Energy (DOE), and the National Science Foundation (NSF)--provide over 90 percent of all SBIR funds. By itself, DOD accounts for slightly over half of the total expenditures. Each agency manages its own program while the Small Business Administration (SBA) plays a central administrative role and has published policy directives and annual reports for the program.

SBIR legislation requires a uniform three-phase process for SBIR projects. Phases I and II are intended to develop an innovative idea. Phase III generally involves the use of nonfederal funds for commercial application of this technology or follow-on non-SBIR government contracts for government application.

On the basis of discussions with the SBIR Program managers at the agencies with SBIR Programs, we decided that the best source of information about Phase III activity would be the companies that had won Phase II awards. We sent questionnaires to all the Phase II awardees from the first 4 years--1984 through 1987--in which the agencies made Phase II awards. We chose the earliest recipients because studies by experts concluded that 5 to 9 years are needed for a company to progress from a concept to a commercial product. We did not include Phase II recipients from 1988 or later because, in most cases, they have not had sufficient time to "make or break" themselves in Phase III. We received responses from 1,457 projects, or 77 percent of the projects that we surveyed.

THE QUALITY OF SBIR RESEARCH COMPARED FAVORABLY WITH OTHER FEDERAL RESEARCH

I would like to briefly summarize the findings of our January 1989 report regarding the quality of SBIR research before discussing the commercial trends of the program. In general, our earlier report concluded that the quality of SBIR research compared favorably with other federal research. We based this conclusion on a survey of 530 project officers responsible for overseeing and monitoring SBIR and other federal research.

Overall, project officers judged about half of the SBIR projects to be of about the same quality as other research for

which they were responsible. They rated 29 percent of the projects as somewhat or much better and 19 percent as somewhat or much worse. A similar rating pattern was found for most of the 10 specific factors regarding research quality. These factors included the overall quality of the project and the likelihood that the project would lead to the invention and commercialization of new products, processes, or services. Responses concerning the likelihood that a project would lead to invention and commercialization were more positive than for other factors. For this factor, most projects (53 percent) were regarded as better than other research, while 29 percent were judged about the same. Only about 12 percent were judged worse than other research.

Our earlier report also discussed ways in which agencies try to ensure the quality of their SBIR research projects. Agency project selection procedures, for example, seek to identify and fund SBIR proposals of high scientific and technical merit. We also found that the SBIR selection process was highly competitive, as indicated by the large "pool" of technically qualified proposals available for agencies to consider.

I would like now to turn to our findings regarding the commercial trends of the program.

THE SBIR PROGRAM SHOWS SUCCESS IN PHASE III

Most SBIR projects we analyzed remained active in Phase III and achieved the majority of this activity in the private sector, indicating that projects in general are moving toward the goal of private-sector commercialization. Of the 1,457 projects, 939, or about 64 percent, have obtained sales and/or additional developmental funding already or expect them by the end of 1993. As of July 1991, the SBIR Program had generated about \$1.1 billion in Phase III sales and additional funding for technical development, with up to about \$3 billion more expected by the end of 1993.

Figure 1, included as appendix I in this statement, shows the total sales achieved by SBIR Phase II projects and the distribution of these sales to key customers as of July 1991. Overall, 515 projects (or about a third of the projects in our survey) reported actual sales of \$471 million. Customers purchasing the results of SBIR activity in Phase III included the private sector; export markets; DOD, NASA, and other federal agencies; and others such as state and local governments. Combining the private sector with export sales, the private sector emerges as the major customer by a margin of about two to one.

A high concentration of this sales activity resulted from relatively few awards. For example, 22 projects accounted for about \$232 million, or almost half, of the overall \$471 million in

sales. The two largest individual sales reached about \$25 million each. By contrast, 175 projects reported sales of less than \$100,000.

These overall sales results provide an early view of commercial trends. About half of the first sales reported for projects with sales occurred within 3 years of the time of our survey, and most of these projects expect further sales. In addition, another 238 projects reported that sales had not yet occurred but are expected. A total of \$1.94 billion in further sales is expected between July 1991 and the end of 1993.

In addition to information on sales, we developed data on actual and expected additional developmental funding for SBIR projects--another key measure of the program's commercial trends. Among the projects in our survey, about half reported additional developmental funding that amounted to \$646 million as of July 1991. Total additional developmental funding from private sources reached \$363.8 million, while \$282 million took the form of further federal funding. Figure 2, included as appendix II, summarizes the sources of these funds in greater detail. The sources included many types of nonfederal funding, such as the company itself, other private companies, venture capitalists, and private investors. Federal sources included non-SBIR federal funds and later related SBIR awards. As a supplement to the \$646 million in additional developmental funding, projects remaining active expected a minimum of \$335 million and a maximum of about \$1 billion between July 1991 and the end of 1993.

In contrast to the 939 projects remaining active, 518 projects have been discontinued. A total of 96 of these discontinued projects indicated that they had achieved Phase III activity but that the project subsequently ended. For another 422 projects, Phase III activity had not occurred and was not expected; no further work on these projects was under way. Thus, only about 29 percent of the projects responding to our survey were discontinued without ever entering Phase III.

Projects were discontinued for a wide variety of reasons. The most frequently cited reason was the insufficiency of additional funding for further technical development. About 55 percent of the discontinued projects identified this factor as playing a moderate or great role in their discontinuation. Other key factors included a company shift of R&D priorities, the achievement of the project's goals, and a small market demand.

RESULTS OF PHASE III ACTIVITY,
INCLUDING COMMERCIALIZATION,
VARY BY AGENCY

Although many projects were carried forward to Phase III, the sales averages for the projects varied greatly among the agencies.

Projects funded by HHS and NSF reported substantially higher sales per project than those funded by DOD, DOE, and NASA. HHS' projects achieved an average of about \$677,000 and NSF's, \$531,000 for each project responding to the survey. DOD, the largest SBIR agency, achieved a project average of about \$285,000; DOE, \$215,000; and NASA, \$161,000.

The percentage of private-sector commercialization achieved by the five major agencies' projects also varied widely. Figure 3, included as appendix III, provides an overview of the total sales for each of the major agencies' projects. This figure shows the distribution of sales to the private and federal sectors for those companies that identified their customers. It indicates a range in the percentage of private-sector commercialization--from 40 percent for DOD to 92 percent for HHS. DOD, in fact, is the only federal agency among the five largest ones in the SBIR Program whose SBIR projects made more sales to the federal government than to the private sector. Since DOD's 686 projects represented almost half of the projects included in our survey, these results significantly affect the overall direction of sales in Phase III.

Although DOD is the only major federal agency among the top five whose SBIR projects' sales to the federal government exceeded sales to the private sector, DOD's SBIR officials are further emphasizing the goal of meeting agency R&D needs. In particular, the program managers for the Army and Navy indicated that steps have been taken or are under way to strengthen their SBIR Programs by making them more responsive to their agency mission, which may further limit their potential for application in the private sector.

By contrast, SBIR officials in NASA, DOE, and NSF are taking steps to place greater emphasis on increasing private-sector commercialization. NASA's program manager required in 1991 that at least half of the SBIR subtopics in which R&D may be performed must have identifiable commercial potential. He also required in November 1991 that at least half of all Phase I NASA awards have a clear indication of a significant commercial application. DOE's program manager has focused on preparing DOE Phase II awardees to think as entrepreneurs. To this end, DOE has sponsored a Commercialization Assistance Project for its Phase II awardees for the past 3 years (1988-91), through which its awardees make business presentations to corporations and venture capital companies as potential sources of funding. As an important part of NSF's efforts to enhance private-sector commercialization, one NSF program manager noted NSF's policy of placing strong emphasis on a follow-on funding commitment for potential Phase II awardees. He said that potential awardees have to be encouraged to think as much about the commercial applications as about the research. The program manager for the NIH program, which funds more than 90 percent of HHS' SBIR Program, told us that NIH was making no specific efforts to enhance Phase III activity because NIH's SBIR

awardees have achieved a high level of activity and additional agency efforts were not being considered.

REASONS FOR LOWER MINORITY AND
DISADVANTAGED BUSINESS ACTIVITY
ARE DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE

Minority and disadvantaged businesses conducting 147 projects responded to our survey, representing about 10 percent of our response. These companies reported about 4.4 percent of the sales and 6.7 percent of the additional developmental funding reported for all projects. Thus, the level of sales and funding per project is lower than the average.

The reasons for this difference are difficult to determine, and any conclusions that might be drawn need to be treated with caution. In general, numerous factors may play a small or great role in shaping the outcome of any SBIR project or group of projects.

One observation is that minority and disadvantaged businesses received relatively fewer awards from HHS and NSF, the two SBIR Programs that achieved the highest level of commercialization in their projects. While minority and disadvantaged business projects represented about 10 percent of our survey response, they accounted for about 6 percent of the responses from projects funded by HHS and NSF. In addition, minority and disadvantaged business sales accounted for about one to two percent of the total sales for projects funded by each of these agencies. Thus, there were not only relatively fewer projects; these projects also achieved a lower level of sales in HHS and NSF.

We want to emphasize that these observations are based only on those projects that responded to our survey. In particular, the relatively fewer projects in this category that responded to our survey do not necessarily reflect the overall percentage of minority and disadvantaged business awards made by these agencies nor do they necessarily relate to the level of the outreach efforts undertaken by these agencies.

In general, we found no other differences that might help to account for the lower level of activity in minority and disadvantaged business projects. We reviewed other potential factors, including the year of the award and the amount of time that the technology has had to develop. Awards to minority and disadvantaged businesses showed almost exactly the same distribution as all other awards by year. Also, as stated in our report, the reasons given for discontinuing minority and disadvantaged business projects followed a pattern generally similar to those cited for all projects. In addition, about two-thirds of the projects conducted by minority and disadvantaged

businesses reported that they remain active, similar to that for all of the projects responding to our survey.

FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT IN SBIR
IS SUBSTANTIALLY LOWER THAN
U.S. INVOLVEMENT

We reviewed the role of foreign involvement in the SBIR program because, at the beginning of our study, we heard concerns expressed about this issue. However, in all the activities that we studied, foreign involvement in SBIR is substantially lower than U.S. involvement. In particular, foreign buyouts have occurred very infrequently so far. Foreign participation in other types of business activity such as licensing is somewhat more evident but still remains well below that of domestic companies and investors.

Regarding foreign buyouts, only one project (out of 1,034 projects responding to this part of our survey) reported a foreign buyout of the SBIR company that had conducted the project; 11 other projects reported ongoing negotiations in this regard. Eleven projects reported partial purchase of their company by an overseas source, and 24 projects reported ongoing negotiations in this regard. The figures for complete or partial acquisition of SBIR companies by domestic companies or investors were several times higher.

In areas other than acquisition of SBIR companies, however, we did find more evidence of foreign involvement. For instance, almost 50 projects reported finalized licensing agreements overseas, and about another 100 projects reported ongoing negotiations. Our survey did not obtain more detailed information on the nature of these licensing agreements.

As noted in our report, many SBIR projects have not yet had enough time to reach commercial maturity. As more of them develop their SBIR technologies and markets, however, they may become more attractive to other companies and investors, not only in the U.S. but overseas.

ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED
TO STRENGTHEN PHASE III ACTIVITY

Four issues emerged in our review of Phase III activity. The first issue is the differing emphasis among the major agencies on the program goal of increasing private-sector commercialization. As the largest agency in the SBIR program, DOD, as mentioned above, is also the only major agency whose projects made more sales to the federal agencies (primarily DOD) than to the private sector. In addition, the policies pursued by key program managers in DOD indicate a growing emphasis on the use of SBIR projects to meet agency R&D needs.

Although DOD projects have achieved 40 percent of their sales in the private sector, there may be greater opportunities for DOD to respond to the goal of increasing private-sector commercialization without weakening its commitment to its own mission-related R&D needs. One way is to emphasize commercialization that involves a greater role for "dual use" technologies capable of meeting civilian as well as military needs. For example, nine DOD Phase II projects responding to our survey achieved sales of \$500,000 or more to both DOD and the private sector. One of these projects, conducted by Integrated Systems of Santa Clara, California, involved the development of software for a robot to load munitions. Despite the project's narrow focus, the core technology, according to the company's vice president, was equally adaptable to military robots and automobiles. As a result, the company achieved \$2.5 million in sales to DOD and \$5 million in sales to the automobile industry based on this Phase II award. It also reported \$2.5 million in sales to NASA.

A second issue that needs to be addressed involves a question about the need for further competition in awarding a Phase III contract when an SBIR project has already competed successfully in Phases I and II. In particular, DOD and NASA officials have expressed a need to clarify the contractual procedures that should be followed when entering into a follow-on, non-SBIR-funded production contract under Phase III. These officials are unsure how the competition requirements of the Competition in Contracting Act of 1984, as amended (CICA), apply to such contracts.

Federal agencies are following different approaches to contracting under Phase III because of two differing interpretations of the relationship between CICA and Phase III. One view is that since Phase III, unlike Phases I and II, is a procurement for products intended for government use and funded outside the SBIR Program, the competition requirements of CICA must apply. Under this interpretation, competition is required unless the proposed Phase III award fits within one of CICA's recognized exceptions to the competition requirements. The other view is that Phase III is an integral part of the SBIR program and that sufficient competition has occurred in the previous phases to satisfy CICA competition requirements.

According to some program managers and contracting officers, the current uncertainties about the relationship between Phase III and CICA have also resulted in a tendency by some contracting officers to remain within Phase II instead of moving forward to Phase III. In other words, contracting officers are modifying or extending Phase II contracts or simply discontinuing the SBIR project at the end of the original Phase II contract instead of attempting to contract under Phase III.

In general, federal officials support the view that the competition requirements of CICA should not apply to Phase III

because these requirements have already been met in the previous phases. However, most agree that the law is not clear on this point and suggest that a clarification of the law would be helpful. We agree that a clarification would be beneficial to achieve uniformity in contracting practices.

A third issue raises a question of who--the federal agency or the company that developed an SBIR technology--should perform additional work for the government after SBIR funding ends. This question has arisen in at least two cases and led to serious disagreement between the company and the agency in one of them, resulting in the potential loss of the company's ability to pursue the technology it developed in the first two phases of the program. In this case, the company, Humbug Mountain Research Laboratory in Duarte, California, had expected to receive a \$10 million Phase III contract. Instead, a Navy laboratory, the Naval Air Engineering Center in Lakehurst, New Jersey, has continued to work on its own with the company's SBIR-developed technology after the end of Phase II funding. In addition, senior officials at several other companies, including three companies with numerous SBIR awards, told us that they had encountered competition with federal laboratories in their SBIR-related activities.

This issue raises a basic question about what a company can expect after it conducts R&D for federal agencies in Phases I and II. The uncertainties surrounding this issue have not been resolved, and further controversy remains a possibility. Thus, a clarification of policy regarding this issue would be helpful.

A fourth issue involves the lower performance of frequent winners in Phase III and the need to review their performance more closely. We are concerned that their lower performance diminishes the overall achievements of the program in Phase III while at the same time limiting participation by other companies. In reviewing this issue, we defined frequent winners as companies receiving 5 or more Phase II awards during the 1984 to 1987 time frame covered by our survey. Frequent winners, which included 45 companies in our survey, reported a Phase III sales average per project of about \$237,000. Companies receiving fewer than 5 awards reported a Phase III sales average per project of about \$353,000. Frequent winners also obtained less additional developmental funding per project. In addition, they obtained substantially less additional developmental funding per project from the private sector than did other companies--\$136,000 compared with \$290,000.

Although the range of performance among frequent winners is great, extending from no sales to \$16.8 million in sales, their overall performance raises some concern about their commitment to Phase III. At the same time, they are receiving a large amount of SBIR money. Five companies, for example, have won 529 Phase I awards and 173 Phase II awards, amounting to almost \$100 million, through fiscal year 1990. In response to our concerns, SBA

initiated a study of the operating attributes of these firms in August 1991 and expects to complete the study later in 1992.

In summary, even though SBIR projects have not yet had sufficient time to achieve their full commercial potential, the program overall is showing success in Phase III activity. The reasons for the lower level of minority and disadvantaged business activity in Phase III are difficult to determine, and any conclusions regarding this issue need to be treated with caution because of the complexity of the SBIR Program. Foreign involvement in the SBIR program is lower than that of domestic companies and investors at present. However, as more SBIR technologies come to maturity, they may become more attractive to other companies and investors, not only in the U.S. but overseas.

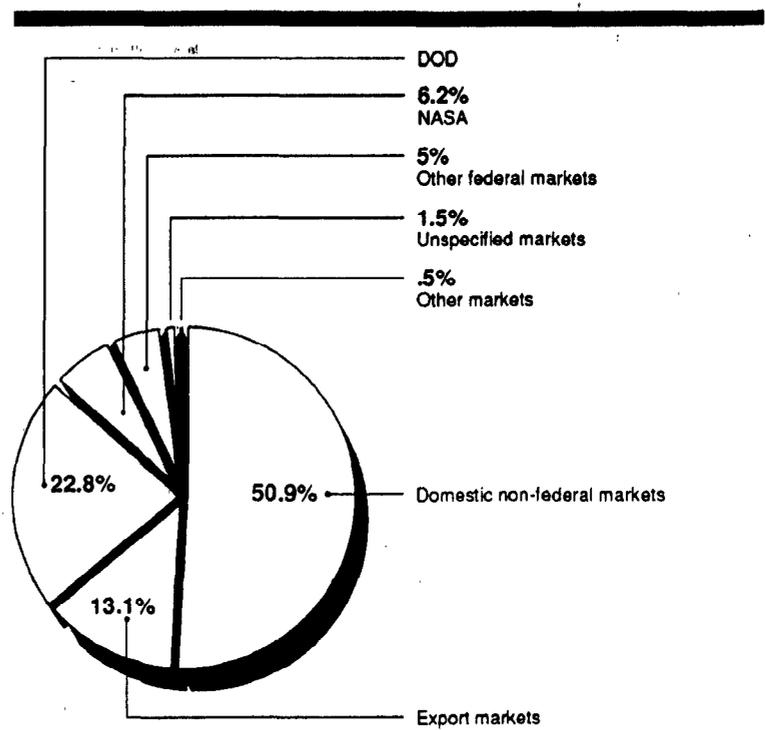
Although the SBIR program is showing success in its Phase III activities, our report contains three matters for congressional consideration to further strengthen the program:

- To further the goal of increasing private-sector commercialization, the Congress may wish to consider whether DOD should place greater emphasis on commercialization through such means as identifying and selecting dual use technologies for SBIR awards.
- To eliminate inconsistent agency practices in requiring competition for federal, non-SBIR-funded follow-on contracts, the Congress may wish to consider clarifying whether Phase III activity must comply with CICA's competitive procedures or whether the competition in the earlier phases of the program satisfies the CICA requirements.
- To avoid misunderstandings between companies and federal agencies, the Congress may wish to consider requiring the SBA Administrator to issue a policy directive for agencies that are planning to work on a company's SBIR technology after the end of SBIR funding. Such a directive would clarify the circumstances under which it may be appropriate for an agency to continue working with a company through a follow-on, non-SBIR-funded contract.

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This concludes my statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or Members of the Committee may have.

Figure 1: Federal and Private-Sector Sales by Phase II SBIR Projects

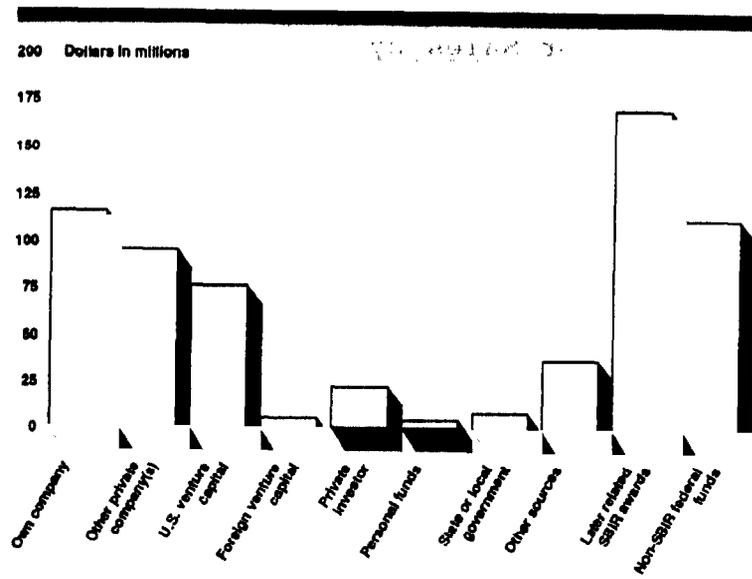


Total sales for 515 of 1,457 projects as of July 1991 were \$471 million.

Private sector commercialization includes domestic non-federal and export markets.

Total may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

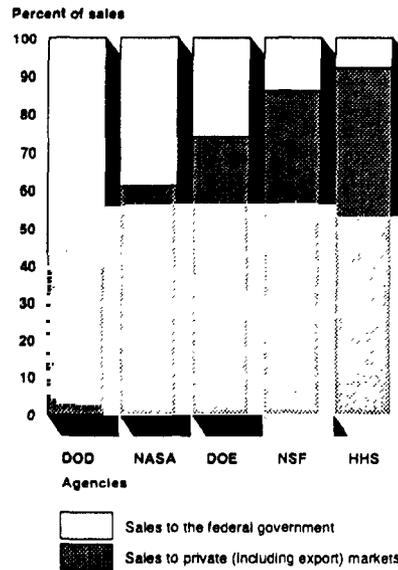
Figure 2: Sources of Additional Developmental Funding



Sources of additional developmental funds

Total additional developmental funds for 732 of 1,457 projects as of July 1991 were \$646 million.

Figure 3: Major SBIR Agencies' Percentage of Sales to Federal and Private Markets



Total sales for DOD were \$195.5 million; for NASA, \$36.4 million; for DOE, \$31.1 million; for NSF, \$58.9 million; and for HHS, \$127.3 million.

The above totals might exceed the sum of individual amounts allocated to various markets because some companies provided only their overall sales and did not specify the customer(s) for their projects.

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