Retain robust federal support for scientific research (guest commentary)

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By Vernon Ehlers

There’s no doubt Michigan’s families are hurting.

With the third-highest unemployment rate in the nation behind Nevada and California, they are struggling to pay mortgages, keep the lights on and feed their children.

While unemployed workers continue their search for jobs, the congressional super committee will meet to decide $1.2 trillion in cuts under the recently passed Budget Control Act.

As the committee members work toward their goal, they should maintain robust federal support of the nation’s scientific enterprise, which has contributed to more than half of U.S. economic growth since World War II. The MRI, iPad and laser are a few examples of the innovations started in laboratories with scientists conducting early-stage scientific research. Invented more than 50 years ago, the laser has many everyday applications and is vital to the U.S. military, health care, consumer and business electronics and many other industries.

Our esteemed universities across the statewide are working on cutting-edge research through the support of the U.S. Department of Energy’s Office of Science, the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and the National Institutes of Health.

From studying complex materials on the nano scale to more efficiently heating our homes to researching the smashing of atoms to find ways to improve medical devices, university research continues to resonate in our daily lives.

The University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Wayne State University and Western Michigan University continue to push the boundaries of discovery in the area of biomedical research as they search for better ways to cure diseases and develop new medical devices to help patients navigate their disabilities. And our many other colleges and universities are working hard to educate the next generation of scientists and engineers as well.

Michigan also is fortunate to be the home of the Dow Chemical Co., a leading science and technology company. Dow understands the importance of scientific research in creating new technologies that lead to new innovations and new
jobs. For example, Dow is helping auto manufacturers reduce vehicle weight — and in turn — improve energy efficiency through the development of a flexible material that binds to dissimilar materials. The company is committed to its mission statement "to passionately innovate" by working toward solutions that will make our world safer, healthier, cleaner and more sustainable.

The aforementioned reasons are why we urge our Michigan representatives Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, and Dave Camp, R-Midland, — members of the super committee — to help build a better America by maintaining robust federal support of the nation’s scientific enterprise. Doing so will ensure federal laboratories and universities can continue their essential research, leading to new ideas, innovations and jobs for all Americans. Scientists, laboratory assistants and data technicians all play vital roles in maintaining the country’s role as a scientific leader.

We are at a critical juncture in our economy as the nation teeters on the brink of another recession. We can ill afford to torch the seed corn of innovation — early-stage scientific research — which has yielded great economic benefits for all Americans.

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