Nearly four decades ago, Department of Energy (DOE) laboratories recognized that the prevailing vector supercomputing technology would need to be replaced with systems that used many smaller microprocessors to support the ever-growing need for computational power and speed. Today these massively parallel processing (MPP) systems have become the dominant approach for building the most powerful computing systems in the world.

That successful shift was built directly on coordinated R&D investments from the Advanced Scientific Computing Research (ASCR) program. Before MPP systems could be used for scientific discovery, researchers needed to address scaling challenges at every level, from building the communication fabric needed to connect thousands of microprocessors to developing scientific applications.

ASCR’s R&D investments in programming models and systems, system software, and communication libraries were critical to the large-scale use of MPP in science.

- ASCR support led to several programming standards, including MPI (message passing interface), PGAS (partitioned global address space) and UPC (unified parallel C) that enabled applications to be developed for MPP systems.
- ASCR’s further support of system software, message-passing libraries and underlying algorithms ensured that these applications could effectively harness MPP systems and helped researchers produce software that was portable across different systems. These technologies, adopted by industry, have formed HPC’s ecosystem over the past three decades.

ASCR’S investments combined with DOE’s R&D investments in applications through the Scientific Discovery through Advanced Computing (SciDAC) program and partnerships with industry vendors have boosted computational capabilities for science.

- When acquiring new supercomputers, DOE viewed industry vendors as partners.
- Improvements in MPP systems support science advances, which, in turn, lead to further advances in MPP and a larger industry market for MPP systems, paving the way for tomorrow’s computers and assuring U.S. leadership in the field.

ASCR R&D investments in scalable programming models, system software and communication libraries laid the foundation for today’s key computational science applications.

A massive return on computing investment

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