

Trump Resists Funding Boost for US Science Agencies

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All around the world, the scientific community is facing serious challenges. These challenges range from the rise of anti-science beliefs such as the “antivaxxer” movement to governments that fail to value scientific research. In fact, science is getting threatened even in a developed nation like the US. President Trump recently made it clear that he wants no boost to the budgets of two major US science agencies. These agencies are the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

In March 2019, Trump threatened the US science budget by asking Congress to slash the budgets of almost all federal research agencies. The only exceptions were the Department of Energy (DOE) and NASA. Trump appears to want increased funding for these two agencies.

This comes soon after the December 2018 – January 2019 [US government shutdown](#). Lasting for 35 long days, this was the longest US government shutdown in history. The economic losses, estimated at around US\$30 billion, also affected the scientific community. At the NSF alone, around 2,000 grant proposals were delayed or otherwise affected.

Democrats Support Increased Science Funding

In May, House Democrats began pushing bills proposing large funding increases for many research agencies. One bill [awards the NIH an extra US\\$2 billion](#). This is in contrast to the US\$5 billion reduction sought by the Trump Administration. Another bill increases the NSF budget by 7%. This opposes the 12% decrease the Administration wants.

However, the proposed increases have received strong objections from the OMB.

Does Trump Recognize the Value of Research?

In May 2019, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) sent a number of letters to the US House of Representatives. These letters appear to confirm the views of those who believe Trump does not recognize the value of research. He also [appears to lack a firm approach](#) to federal investment in the scientific research sector. This lack of clarity could make it difficult to protect research funding in negotiations for the 2020 budget. Negotiations will begin in October.

Earlier this year, Trump asked Congress to greatly reduce funding for almost all federal research agencies. This is the third year running that Trump has made such a request. The demand is possibly a part of the President's plan to increase military spending while cutting funding for other, civilian programs. Interestingly, these programs include research programs as well. For the last two years, Democrat and Republican legislators have reversed these cuts. They plan to do the same for the coming year.

What Did the Letters Have?

As mentioned previously, the OMB recently sent three key letters to Nita Lowey, Chair of the House Committee on Appropriations. The letters refer to the proposed 2020 budget.

7 May: Acting OMB Director Russell Vought wrote to Lowey to [object to a proposed US\\$2 billion](#) increase in funding for the NIH. Vought said that the increase is "unsustainable and incompatible with the Administration's effort to focus resources on

high priority research.” However, an identical increase last year received no objection.

20 May: Vought wrote to Lowey regarding the DOE. He did not [mention the decision to fund](#) the DOE’s Office of Science with an additional US\$1.4 billion. He did object to a funding boost to the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E). This is a DOE agency that carries out research on difficult energy problems.

21 May: Vought wrote to Lowey to object to a proposed increase in funding for the NSF. The suggested increase was US\$1.6 billion. “This unrequested funding [undermines the Administration’s intent](#) to keep non-defense spending in check,” said Vought.

Vought’s comments on NASA funding are in sharp contrast. The bill funds NASA at close to the requested level. However, Vought complains that the Administration “is very disappointed.” This is because “the bill provides far less funding than is needed to support the Administration’s goal of a near-term human lunar landing.”

This series of letters shows Trump’s mixed approach towards research funding. The letters also show the aim of the OMB to oppose the funding increases proposed by Democrats.

Increased Funding for DOE and NASA

The letters from the OMB make clear that some research agencies are under threat of reduced funding. However, the same does not apply to the DOE and NASA.

NASA is [covered by the spending bill](#) that funds the NSF. Vought’s letters do not mention the extra US\$850 million that will be added to Trump’s request for space science programs. Apparently, this is acceptable to the OMB. Instead, Vought argues that more money should be given to allow the US “to return astronauts to the moon by 2024.” This is known to be a personal goal of Trump.

As mentioned above, the DOE will also receive more funding than requested.

The Scientific Community Responds

Fortunately, Vought’s letters appear to have had little effect. After they were sent, the House Appropriations Committee approved the bills. As a matter of fact, there was no change in funding for the NIH, NSF or ARPA-E.

But what does the scientific community think about the potential risk to future funding? After the [2019 budget was approved](#), almost 5 months late, many scientists were relieved. Ben Corb, a spokesperson for the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, said “We are glad that Congress, in its wisdom, sees the value of what the scientific community does.”

The 2020 budget negotiations are now approaching. Many individual scientists, research groups and agencies are still recovering from the effects of the government shutdown. Conferences and research trips were cancelled. Restricted access to

collections, such as at the Smithsonian museum was also evident (simultaneously, resulting in zero income from.) Live data collection stopped, leaving large gaps in datasets. For many scientists, this event was a taste of what might happen if future science budgets are drastically cut.

What are your thoughts on the proposed US science budget? Will funding changes to the US science agencies affect you? Share your ideas in the comments section below.

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