

US sequester cuts gut scientific research

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Last year, the US government announced an eight-year federal budget sequester that immediately cut funding for various social welfare programs and for scientific research programs. Among the targets for cuts were the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF), which face cuts of 5.1 and 2 percent respectively in the first year alone.

As a result of the cuts, the NIH and the NSF were forced to cut funding for roughly 1000 grants totally, while the overall amount distributed to existing grants was also reduced. In addition to the amount of funding cut from individual labs, NIH projected that the results of the sequester plan would delay the process of advancing treatment for diseases and health conditions that threaten human life.

This is particularly damaging, since treatments usually take around 10 years of development before they are available to the public, even after the cause and progression of a certain disease or condition are discovered. The sequester cuts mean that this process will take even longer.

Scientific research is an integral part of society. Basic research in the physical and biological fields allows applications that improve the quality of life and allows society to solve the most important problems faced by humankind. As a result of the cuts, cancer research, public health research, neurological disease research, and many other fields that improve living standards will be restricted. As a direct result of the cuts, countless lives will be cut short.

The NIH and NSF are the largest sources of federal funding for scientific research in the United States. Currently, the top research institutions in the US get most of their funding from the NIH, which is the single largest source of federal funding for medical research. Universities like Johns Hopkins, with large research projects, receive most of their funding from the NIH. The grant money awarded from these organizations

pays for the materials required for research along with the salaries of scientists, research assistants and post-doctoral associates. Currently, a graduate in the life sciences can expect to earn about \$15 an hour for work with an undergraduate degree.

These cuts are not only impacting research itself, but also the jobs surrounding scientific research.

According to a survey from the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology taken just six months after the imposition of the sequester cuts, more than 50 percent of researchers had either laid off lab personnel or expect to lay off scientists as a result of the cuts. More researchers also expect to spend a greater amount of time appealing for grant funds rather than continuing their research.

Non-research positions are also suffering as a result of the sequestration. A maintenance worker at the NIH campus in Boston told the *World Socialist Web Site* that “there have been multiple rounds of furloughs for non-essential personnel, such as researchers and administrative employees,” and that they will not be able to hire new people in some departments for the duration of the sequester.

A survey of researchers at 74 universities, conducted by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, the American Association of Universities and The Science Coalition showed that 81 percent of researchers’ projects had been immediately impacted by the reduced funding. The study also revealed that 58 percent of researchers had either laid off scientists or reduced their positions, while 41 percent of researchers admitted fewer graduate students or reduced stipends and undergraduate research programs.

This survey was completed three months after the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology’s survey, which indicates how rapidly the cuts to scientific research are being felt by the scientific community.

Despite hollow calls in Congress to restore the level of funding for scientific research to pre-sequestration levels, the level of funding for NIH and NSF remains lower than in recent years.

In fact, funding for NIH in 2014 is \$940 million less than 2012 expectations. When measured in real dollars, current funding levels are 22 percent lower than 2003 levels. NIH has faced cuts in real dollars in nine of the last ten years.

As for NSF, the organization is still receiving \$82 million less than in 2013. These cuts were overseen by the Democratic Party, which makes all the more hypocritical its push for a modest restoration of lost funds. Both parties of Wall Street are aiding the financial aristocracy in its pilfering of funds from scientific research. According to the American ruling class, not a dollar that could be funneled into financial speculation can be wasted on life-saving medical research.

Wall Street has seen unsurpassed economic gains in part because of these cuts. In the wake of the cuts, the stock markets have reached all-time highs while the financial barons have granted themselves the biggest bonuses since the crash of 2007-2008. Meanwhile, poverty and social inequality are increasing at break-neck speeds.

As the impact of the sequester indicates, the cuts have come at a heavy price for the rest of the population. Scientific research in America is suffering while Wall Street and the wealthiest layers of society are reaping massive gains. The cuts to NIH and NSF serve as a clear indication that scientific progress and capitalism are incompatible.



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