News | Research Funding

NSF closes fiscal 2026 with over $1 billion left unspent

The agency says the money will be invested in Trump-aligned initiatives

by **Krystal Vasquez**

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SAVE



The US National Science Foundation has withheld over $1 billion of its fiscal 2026 appropriations. The agency plans to roll the money into initiatives that are more aligned with priorities of the Donald J. Trump administration.

Credit: Shutterstock

Over $1 billion sat unused in US National Science Foundation (NSF) accounts as fiscal 2026 came to a close Oct. 1. A White House Office of Management and Budget apportionment published in August estimates that the NSF will carry $1.7 billion over into fiscal 2027.

The exact number will probably keep changing for at least another year and a half as the agency consolidates and reevaluates figures coming from its different accounts, says Alessandra Zimmermann, project director for the R&D budget and policy program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The *New York Times* recently reported a number closer to $1.4 billion.

Whatever the final figure, the NSF withholding such a large percentage of its budget "is a big change from previous practice," says Noam Ross, executive director of rOpenSci and cofounder of Grant Witness, which has been tracking science funding across agencies since Donald J. Trump's second administration began canceling grants last year.

The NSF has 2 fiscal years to spend the money that Congress appropriates, but the agency has typically spent most of its budget during the first half of that 2-year period.

NSF spokesperson Michael England writes in an email that it carried over these funds "to invest in agency priorities that are aligned with broader Administration initiatives." England adds that in the coming months, the NSF will be announcing "a wide range of additional funding opportunities."

One of these is a project called the Grand Research Challenges, first reported in *Nature*. The challenges are aimed at attracting "nontraditional entrants" in fields like quantum technology and synthetic and engineering biology.

The NSF "remains committed to investing in meritorious foundational research across the sciences and engineering that advances American scientific leadership," England says.

But according to the latest data compiled by Grant Witness, the NSF awarded 6,238 grants in fiscal 2026 and around 8,650 in fiscal 2025, compared with an average of 11,387 grants

awarded annually between fiscal 2021 and fiscal 2024.

The decrease in awarded grants can be seen across nearly all the agency's directorates, Ross notes, despite Congress prohibiting the NSF from cutting any directorate's budget by more than 5% compared with fiscal 2024 in the latest spending bill. "There's just way less out there for researchers," Ross says.

In addition to creating fewer funding opportunities, the NSF's decision to roll over this much money into the next fiscal year could affect the agency's budget going forward. Zimmermann says she could foresee a situation where Congress needs to cut $1 billion from somewhere to meet fiscal goals and decides an easy way to meet that goal is to reduce the budget of the agency that didn't spend the money appropriated.

"That's typically why agencies will rush to spend all their funds," Zimmermann says.

And every cut to research funding can have ripple effects that last for years. For example, the Budget Control Act, which established discretionary spending caps between 2011 and 2021, "basically depreciated research investment for upwards of 10 years," she says.

Although it's too late to prevent the NSF from carrying over such a large percentage of its budget into fiscal 2027, Ross says Congress can use appropriation bills to prevent such large carryovers in the future.

Congress currently has until Dec. 11 to pass the appropriation bills for fiscal 2027.



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