Agency Diverted $1.4 Billion in Science Funds Mandated by Congress

The move, affecting about one-fifth of the National Science Foundation's primary research budget, is the latest sign of how the White House is asserting more control over grants.

Listen · 5:01 min



By Adam Sella, Christopher Flavelle and Irena Hwang

Oct. 2, 2026

The National Science Foundation, one of the biggest sources of federal research funding, withheld $1.4 billion that Congress had intended for research over the course of the past year, according to internal data reviewed by The New York Times.

The extraordinary move — holding back about one-fifth of the N.S.F.'s primary research budget — is the latest sign of how the Trump administration is finding creative ways to work around Congress. Lawmakers from both parties have consistently opposed White House-led proposals to cut funding to major science agencies, including the N.S.F. and the National Institutes of Health.

Since the N.S.F. was founded over 75 years ago, the agency has spent nearly all of its budget on so-called basic research from a wide range of scientific fields, which has led to major advances in technology such as M.R.I.s, semiconductors and the internet.

The White House wants to redirect the money to a limited set of administration priorities, including artificial intelligence and quantum computing, according to two people with knowledge of the administration's plans.

Congress appropriates money to the N.S.F. on two-year cycles, so the agency could still spend the held-over money in the new fiscal year, which began on Thursday.

But Democratic lawmakers see the strategy as more of a political power grab by the White House.

"The money should be granted as Congress intended, and essentially, they're ignoring what Congress did," said Representative Zoe Lofgren of California, the top Democrat on the Science, Space and Technology Committee. "It's a dramatic attack on the science enterprise that has served us very well since World War II, when this whole system was set up," Ms. Lofgren added.

The White House and the N.S.F. said that diverting the money was allowed under Congress's two-year appropriation.

Sign up for the On Politics newsletter. It's a pivotal moment for American politics. Join us for 2026 and beyond. Get it sent to your inbox.

Mike England, a spokesman for the science foundation, said in a statement that the agency had "carried over funds to invest in agency priorities that are aligned with broader administration initiatives."

Mr. England said the agency "remains committed to investing in meritorious foundational research across the sciences and engineering that advances American scientific leadership."

The Trump administration's efforts to gain more power over grants have played out across the government, where funding decisions have historically been led by experts.

Last month, the N.I.H. signed an agreement to collaborate with the Defense Department, drawing criticism from Democrats on Capitol Hill who warned that the plan could allow the Pentagon to go around Congress and gain access to billions of dollars meant for infectious disease research. The administration previously fired the N.S.F.'s independent oversight board. And it has canceled or delayed thousands of grants across both agencies as part of its quest to punish elite universities and eliminate spending President Trump and his aides view as "woke."

Mr. Trump's science adviser, Michael Kratsios, has criticized the agency's system for deciding which grants to fund. In a report released in July, Mr. Kratsios wrote that the science foundation, under the Biden administration, awarded too many grants that focused on diversity and equity. He also argued the N.S.F. should issue more "fast grants," in ways "that bypass external review panels."

The plan to divert N.S.F. funding was reported earlier by Nature, a science journal.

Several people with knowledge of the situation described confusion inside the agency as the staff complied with White House guidance to carry over money as funding deadlines neared. Some divisions had to pull back research proposals that were recommended for funding after peer review, these officials said.

Altogether, the $1.4 billion carried over after the last fiscal year ended on Wednesday amounted to 19 percent of the N.S.F.'s primary research budget allocated by Congress. That is a far higher percentage than in either of the two prior fiscal years, when less than $175 million went unspent, according to internal data from the agency.

At an agency town hall this week, leaders stood by the plan to divert money to administration priorities while offering assurances that the N.S.F. would also remain true to its roots, according to a recording reviewed by The Times.

When an employee raised concerns about whether the N.S.F. would continue supporting basic research, an official responded that "we're transitioning." Still, the official said, the agency would continue to "focus on our mission of foundational research."

Adam Sella covers breaking news for The Times in Washington.

Christopher Flavelle is a Times reporter covering how President Trump is transforming the federal government.

Irena Hwang is a data reporter at The Times, using computational tools to uncover hidden stories and illuminate the news.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 21 of the New York edition with the headline: Science Agency Diverts Money Meant to Fund Basic Research