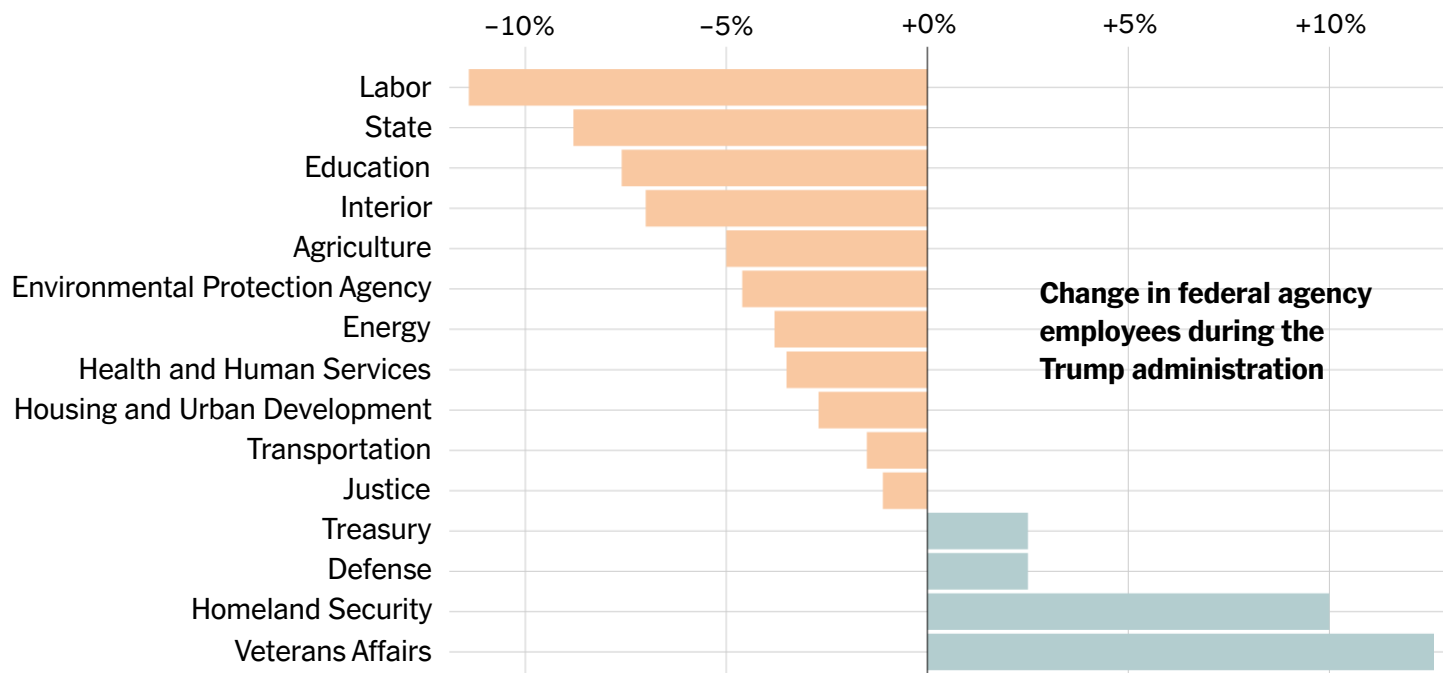


The Government Agencies That Became Smaller, and Unhappier, Under Trump

The total federal civilian work force is slightly larger than four years ago, as a few agencies grew even as others shrank. In some places, morale also took a hit.



Source: FedScope Workforce Data, U.S. Office of Personnel Management



By Emily Badger, Quoc Trung Bui and Alicia Parlapiano

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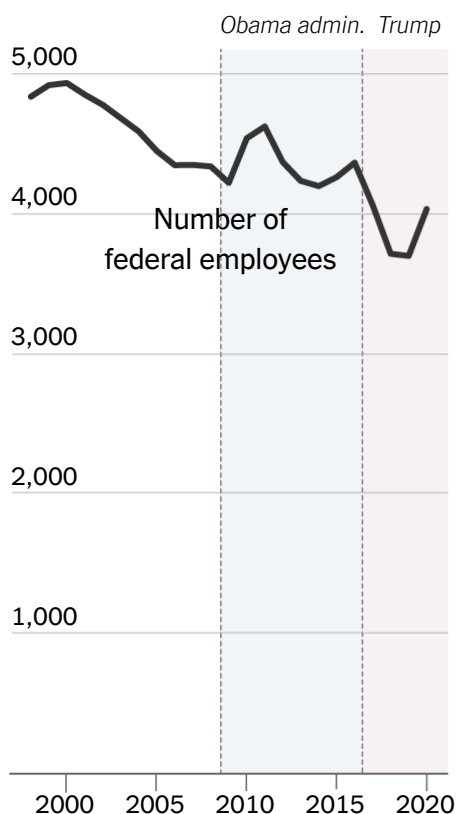
The federal government that Donald J. Trump inherited was aging. The Civil Service system hadn't been updated in decades. Many workers were nearing retirement. The computers were old, too.

And then President Trump set about weakening the Civil Service and slashing many agencies, publicly deriding the government's own work force as "the deep state."

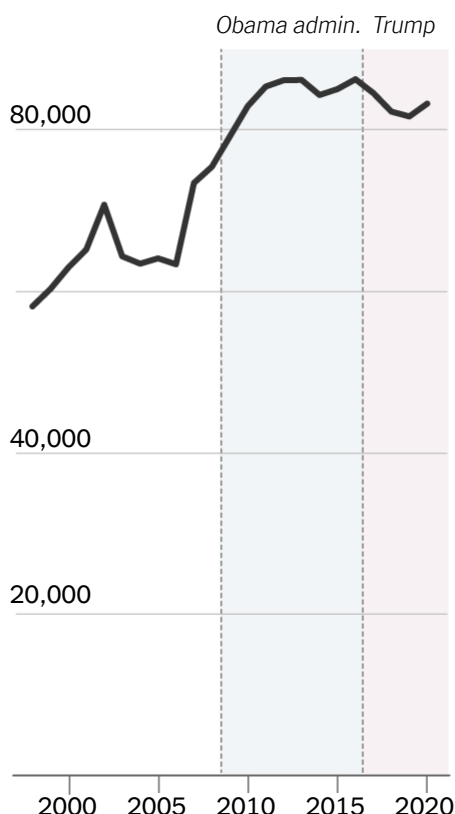
Now President Biden must reckon with these problems, amid national crises that demand the coordination of the federal government.

“Our government has suffered literally decades of rust,” said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan group that seeks to make government more effective. “And then someone came in with a sledgehammer.”

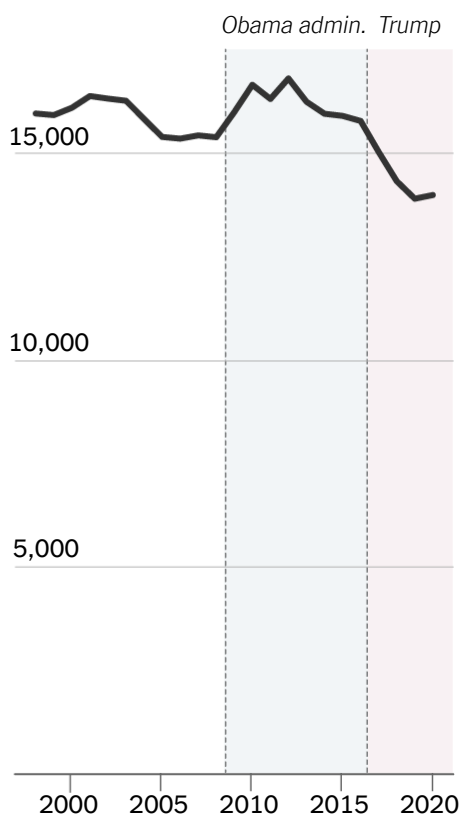
Education Department



Health and Human Services



Labor Department



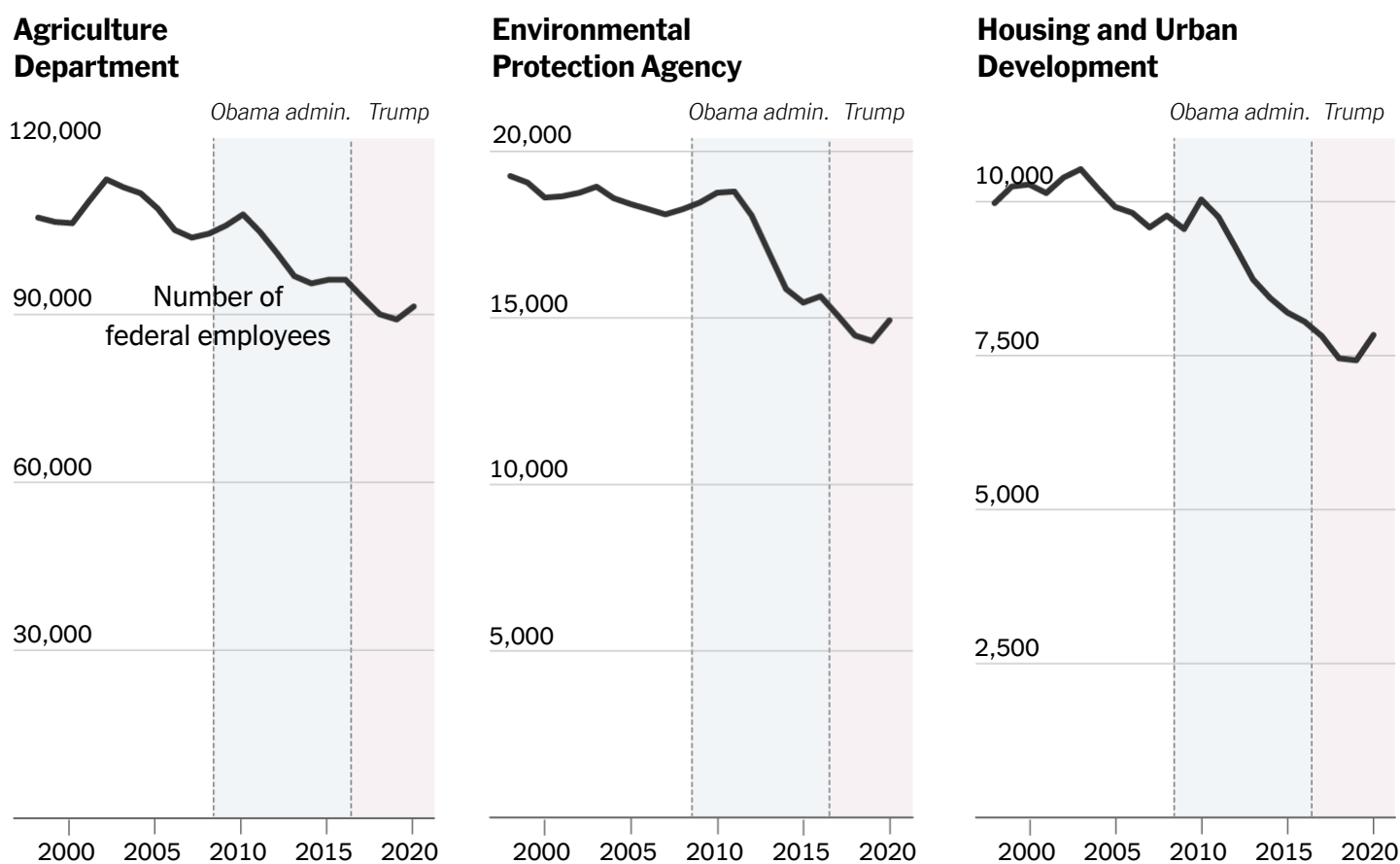
Source: FedScope Workforce Data, U.S. Office of Personnel Management ■ Data for Sept. of each year.

Of core cabinet-level agencies, all but five shrank under Mr. Trump (the Commerce Department always swells in census years). By 2020, there were 300 fewer federal employees at the Department of Education than when Mr. Trump arrived. There were 4,900 fewer at the Department of the Interior, and 1,800 fewer at the Department of Labor.

The vast majority of employees left the Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, after Trump officials abruptly relocated that office from Washington to the Kansas City, Mo., area. The Office of Personnel Management, whose duties include enforcing the nonpartisan nature of the Civil Service, was not abolished as Mr. Trump proposed, but it shrank substantially as some of its functions scattered to other agencies.

These cuts don't add up to the sweeping contraction of government that Mr. Trump and his top officials had hoped for. Congress stymied many of the president's proposed budget cuts. And because the Department of Veterans Affairs in particular continued to grow — a trend supported by politicians in both parties and veterans' organizations — the total civilian federal work force is now 4 percent larger than four years ago.

In sheer numbers, particularly for domestic-focused agencies like the departments of Education and of Housing and Urban Development, Mr. Trump didn't drive as much attrition as across-the-board budget caps known as sequestration did. Those caps, enacted in a 2011 budget deal between President Obama and a Republican-led Congress and primarily taking effect between 2013 and 2017, led to hiring freezes and unfilled positions.



Source: FedScope Workforce Data, U.S. Office of Personnel Management ■ Data for Sept. of each year.

But researchers, union officials and federal workers say President Trump's politicization of normally neutral positions and frequent criticism of his own bureaucracy hurt the public's faith in government, the morale of employees who remain, and the prospects that a new generation will enter public service.

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“Conspiracy theorists have been given credibility by authoritative sources and authoritative agencies in ways that are remarkable,” said Tom Sinks, who retired last year after a 35-year government career that began as an epidemic intelligence service officer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and ended at the Environmental Protection Agency.

“I worry just because this last administration has gone away and we have a new administration,” Mr. Sinks said, “it doesn’t mean in four years, or in eight years or in 12 years, that we won’t have another group of people in there who are trying to undermine the facts and use ‘alternative facts’ to create a reality that isn’t there.”

Career Civil Service workers are used to the shifting priorities that come with new administrations and changing party control in Washington. But many said what they had experienced over the last four years was different. They said expertise itself was under attack, along with the bedrock notion that career employees should be nonpartisan. Federal workers had also never before been told by their president that they were the enemy.

“If I walk out and had my badge on, normally you could be proud to be a government employee,” said Marlo Bryant-Cunningham, who works in retirement services at the Office of Personnel Management and is the president of the union local with the American Federation of Government Employees. “But now it’s like you have to hide it, because you don’t know if people are going to embrace you or attack you.”

The drawn-out sequester had undermined workers’ confidence in the Civil Service system and signaled that their traditional protections were at risk in a financial crisis, even under a relatively liberal president, said Paul Light, a professor of public service at N.Y.U. Mr. Trump then increased that uncertainty by forcing a 35-day government shutdown that ended in January 2019.

“One thing Trump did really well here during his four years was send the message that you are not welcome and you won’t be happy here, and that message went out to young people who go to schools like mine,” Professor Light said. “You can’t be sure about your pay, you can’t be sure about whether there will be a shutdown, you can’t be sure about respect.”

That uncertainty adds to other challenges that have been decades in the making. No administration — Republican or Democratic — has prioritized broad reforms to how the government operates since the 1970s. The compensation system for federal workers hasn’t

fundamentally changed since 1949. Employees lament that some job classifications are too rigid, that the government has contracted out too much expertise, that some training still seems as if it were designed for clerical workers.

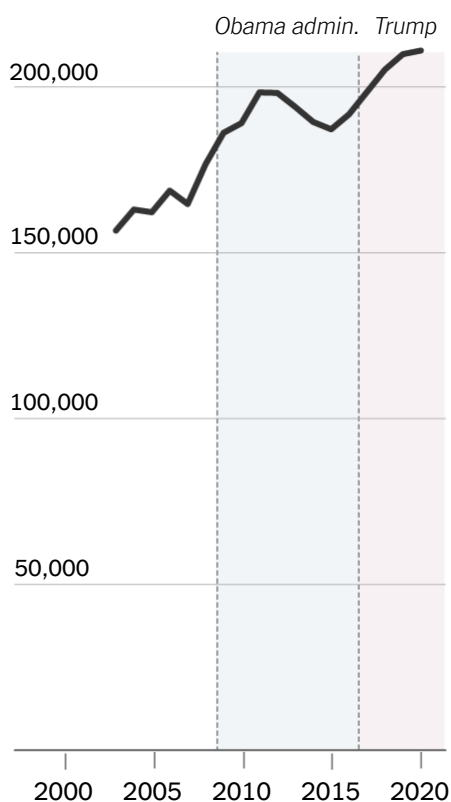
The work force is also approaching a demographic cliff. At the E.P.A., which helped create an entire generation of new environmental science researchers in the 1970s, 20 percent of workers are now 60 or older. The State Department, Treasury and HUD face a similar wave of approaching retirements.

The size of the federal civilian work force has remained remarkably stable for many decades, at about two million, even as the U.S. population has more than doubled since 1950 and as the government's responsibilities have increased in areas like airport security and consumer financial protection. Contractors have been responsible for a significant amount of government work, particularly under Mr. Trump. For the federal work force, priorities have shifted away from agencies focused on domestic issues like housing and labor and toward security and defense.

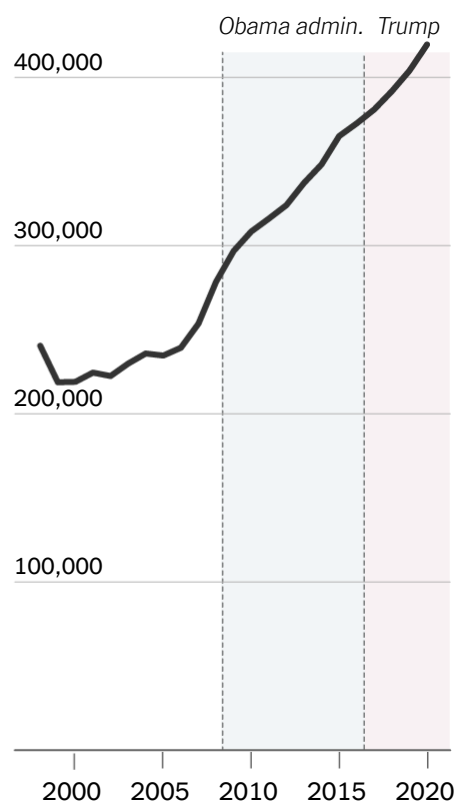
Defense Department



Homeland Security



Veterans Affairs



Source: FedScope Workforce Data, U.S. Office of Personnel Management ■ Data for Sept. of each year.

The effects of all this rust are visible, Mr. Stier said, when the I.R.S. sends stimulus checks to dead people, or when the unemployment insurance system buckles in an economic crisis, or when the federal government struggles to coordinate supplies in a pandemic.

“When you diminish the capacity of the government to serve the American people,” Mr. Stier said, “they get less good service.”

Mr. Trump also targeted Civil Service workers with a series of executive orders stripping employees of some union protections and rights to organize, which Mr. Biden has reversed. One of those orders, signed by Mr. Trump shortly before the November election, sought to reclassify many federal workers into a new category without Civil Service protections, to be treated more like political appointees.

“The whole idea is to really be scrupulous about keeping politics out of the federal work force,” said Jacqueline Simon, the policy director for the American Federation of Government Employees. “There are any number of ways you could corrupt that system, and Trump found them all.”

Government scientists in particular said their work came under attack from political appointees. In a 2018 survey of scientists at 16 federal agencies, 50 percent of respondents, and 81 percent of those at the E.P.A., agreed that political interests “hindered the ability of their agencies to make science-based decisions.”

During Mr. Trump’s first year in office, more than 700 E.P.A. employees quit, retired or took a buyout, including more than 200 scientists.

“I don’t think they were as a general rule consciously trying to drive people out of the agency,” Stan Meiburg, who left the E.P.A. in 2017 as acting deputy administrator, said of the political appointees. “They were more interested in pursuing policies that many inside the agency saw as inconsistent with the reason they had joined E.P.A. in the first place.”

E.P.A. workers who understood that Mr. Trump would be hostile to climate change work were still startled by what happened under the new leadership.

“They did not just focus on greenhouse gas regulations, which we had assumed when he was first inaugurated,” said Betsy Southerland, who was the director of science and technology in the E.P.A. Office of Water when she retired in 2017. “Instead, they went after everything.”

It was clear, she said, that the agency’s new political leaders knew exactly what regulations they wanted to unwind. At other agencies like HUD, where the new secretary, Ben Carson, had no background in housing policy, employees described more of a sense of aimlessness.

Some of this variation between agencies is apparent in annual government surveys of more than 600,000 federal workers. The Partnership for Public Service compiles rankings of the best places to work in government using the surveys, and the results show many workers reported more satisfaction near the end of the Trump administration than they did during the sequestration era of downsizing and hiring freezes, particularly at the Homeland Security and Health and Human Services departments.

How federal employee satisfaction changed during the Trump era

Ratings are out of 100 and based on survey questions asking employees how satisfied they are with their job and with the organization, and if they recommend the organization as a good place to work.

Agency	2019 rating	Change from 2016
Homeland Security	52.3	+6.5
Health and Human Services	71.4	+5.0
Energy	68.2	+4.8
Treasury	62.5	+3.7
Defense	62.8	+3.0
Intelligence community	69.9	+2.9
Transportation	65.7	+2.3
Commerce	69.6	+1.7
Housing and Urban Development	59.9	+1.7
Interior	62.2	+1.2
Large agency median	62.5	-0.6
Labor	61.8	-3.9
Environmental Protection Agency	60.3	-4.1
Justice	61.4	-4.3
State	61.3	-5.5

Note: The Environmental Protection Agency and the departments of Energy, Labor and Housing and Urban Development are considered mid-sized agencies in the analysis. The median rating for mid-sized agencies in 2019 was 67.1, down 1.3 points from 2016. The Department of Veterans Affairs did not participate in the survey in 2019. ■ Source: The Best Places to Work rankings, an analysis of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey by the Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group

But at the departments of Education, Agriculture and State in particular, overall satisfaction fell during Mr. Trump's tenure. And there were many offices within the larger federal agencies where morale dropped precipitously.

Where employee morale increased and decreased the most under Trump

There were larger swings in satisfaction at individual offices within the agencies. The top 10 increases and decreases are shown here.

Office	Agency	2019 rating	Change from 2016
United States Secret Service	Homeland Security	52.9	+20.1
Office of the Inspector General	Defense	70.9	+18.5
U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command	Army	67.4	+18.4
Economic Development Administration	Commerce	75.3	+16.8
Office of the Chief Financial Officer	General Services Administration	81.6	+16.3
Office of Mission Assurance	General Services Administration	66.7	+13.7
Office of the General Counsel	Federal Energy Regulatory Commission	93.2	+11.7
Federal Transit Administration	Transportation	68.9	+11.5
Office of Administrative Services	General Services Administration	69.3	+11.5
GSA IT	General Services Administration	80.5	+11.5
Subagency median		63.9	+1.3
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights	Agriculture	25.9	-20.2
Antitrust Division	Justice	41.6	-21.6
Institute of Education Sciences	Education	42.3	-21.6
Administration for Community Living	Health and Human Services	45.0	-24.3
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services	Education	40.4	-30.7
Office of General Counsel	Agriculture	37.1	-31.4
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education	Education	27.5	-31.5
Merit System Accountability and Compliance	Office of Personnel Management	38.1	-32.2
National Institute of Food and Agriculture	Agriculture	20.3	-32.4
Economic Research Service	Agriculture	36.5	-34.2

Note: Does not include offices without survey data for 2016 or 2019. ■ Source: The Best Places to Work rankings, an analysis of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey by the Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group

Notable at the bottom of that list are the Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the Economic Research Service — the two offices that were told on short notice to relocate from Washington to the Kansas City area so that they could be

closer to the agriculture they study. Many employees in those offices, however, believed they were being forced out of town, or driven to quit, by an administration that disdained statistics.

“U.S.D.A. historically was a place — and this is true of agriculture policy in general — where you didn’t get big partisan splits, you didn’t get whipsawed like you might have if you worked at a place like E.P.A.,” said James MacDonald, who retired from the Economic Research Service after 33 years in government rather than move to Kansas City.

He estimates that of the more than 200 Economic Research Service employees asked to move, about 90 percent declined. They found other government jobs or left government altogether.

“We went along hoping we would go under the radar,” Mr. MacDonald said. “Until things started to go bad.”

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