NSF layoffs in 2025: Deep budget cuts headed for U.S. research sector

[Updated on April 10, 2025 with additional details]

The **2025 National Science Foundation (NSF) layoffs**—stemming from budget freezes and aggressive federal downsizing—could reduce National Science Foundation staff by up to half, threatening the agency's ability to fund critical research nationwide. Amid projections of a multibillion-dollar shortfall under the CHIPS and Science Act and a new executive order pushing rapid workforce reductions.

As of February 21, the agency remained under a short-term continuing resolution that expires on March 14, according to COSSA.org, leaving the NSF budget in limbo. Yet in mid-March, Congress passed and the President signed a Full-Year Continuing Resolution (CR) for Fiscal Year 2025. That move secured topline funding through September 30, 2025, and averted a government shutdown. The CR, however, lacks detailed programmatic guidance. It thus grants significant discretionary power over internal fund allocation to agency leadership operating under White House influence. Additionally, the administration removed the "emergency spending" designation for NSF's $234 million FY25 Major Research Equipment and Facilities Construction (MREFC) budget appropriated by Congress. That development potentially jeopardizes funding for large-scale infrastructure projects. In a February 11 statement, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) alleged that over $2 billion had been "diverted" to DEI-related programs, lauding the White House for "taking a sledgehammer to the radical left's woke nonsense," as noted on the Senate Commerce Committee website. This scrutiny has continued, with Senator Cruz launching a follow-up investigation into the Future of Privacy Forum (FPF) in early April over alleged misuse of NSF/DOE funds for "woke AI" advocacy. Meanwhile, The Guardian reported that layoffs targeting probationary NSF employees have already begun, with some workers given only minutes to clear out their offices.

In a newly disclosed wave on February 18, NSF reportedly fired about 168 employees—roughly 10% of its workforce—in a single morning, many via a Zoom call, with some permanent staff included after retroactive probationary status changes, as Wired reported. In a reversal following court challenges and updated OPM guidance in early March, NSF reinstated nearly all (reportedly 84 out of 86) of the terminated probationary employees with backpay.

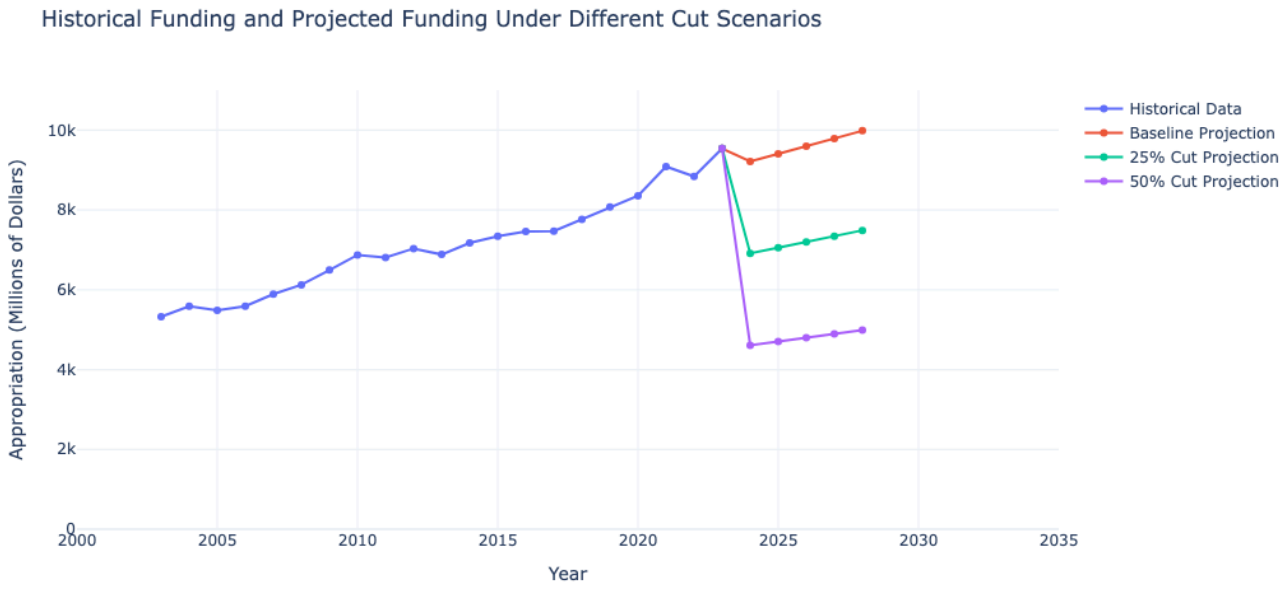
Outside of NSF, some terminated employees at various science-focused agencies were later asked to return to work, such as the National Nuclear Security Administration and United States Department of Agriculture (employees focused on bird flu). For instance, approximately 300 NNSA employees were initially let go, but all but 28 were ultimately reinstated upon discovery that critical staff had been mistakenly terminated, according to AIP.org.

The development comes as *Nature* and others have noted that, while the U.S. remains the world's research superpower, that China is quickly catching up and could be the world's top R&D spender by 2030.

Trimming or halting grant awards

In the face of the cuts, NSF, a major funder of basic research in the U.S., would be forced to considerably reduce or halt grant awards, potentially impacting thousands of researchers, universities, and projects. NPR indicates that the grant payment system is still experiencing delays. While NSF officially resumed proposal processing, review activities, and payment systems (like ACM$) after initial pauses, the grant system operates under considerable strain. Factors weight it down include reduced staffing (loss of experts, buyouts, planned RIFs) and ongoing compliance reviews mandated by executive orders. In total, such factors could lead to expected delays despite official continuity. Actions at sister agencies like NIH, NASA, DOD, and USAID, which saw active grant/contract terminations linked to EO compliance, contribute to uncertainty. Widespread NSF grant terminations, however, have not been confirmed post-Feb 21.

In 2024, the Fiscal Responsibility Act's spending caps resulted in an 8% cut to NSF's budget compared to the prior year, leaving NSF roughly $6.6 billion below the funding targets Congress had set in the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act.



Charting NSF Funding: Historical appropriations vs. future scenarios
Historical data sourced directly from the National Science Foundation establishes the historical funding baseline. Using a linear regression model, we extend this trend to project future funding—and overlay widely reported 25% and 50% cut scenarios.

The 2025 NSF layoffs—stemming from budget freezes and aggressive federal downsizing—did not emerge in a vacuum. Early in 2025, a series of executive orders from the White House placed multiple science agencies under a funding freeze while also directing them to reduce staffing within short timeframes. In particular, the newly formed "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) issued a mandate instructing agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) to cut staff by 25–50% to meet strict budget targets. This directive went beyond routine belt-tightening: the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) began compiling lists of staff on probation (who can be more easily dismissed) and rolling out buyout programs offering "incentives" for employees to resign.

According to internal communications in early February 2025, NSF leadership confirmed that the agency may lay off roughly 375 to 750 employees—over the next several months. OPM has characterized these reductions as part of a government-wide push to downsize federal agencies, describing the buyout offers as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" for employees to leave voluntarily before forced cuts. A federal judge, however, issued a temporary restraining order on February 6 blocking the administration's "deferred resignation" program. Consequently, that delayed immediate layoffs until legal challenges were resolved. Despite the initial TRO, the voluntary "fork in the road" deferred resignation/buyout program proceeded, with union sources indicating roughly120 NSF employees accepted the offer. Furthermore, a February 26 memo from OMB/OPM mandated that all agencies, including NSF, develop formal, multi-phase Agency Reorganization Plans (ARPs) specifically aimed at initiating large-scale Reductions in Force (RIFs). Phase 2 ARPs, detailing planned cuts and restructuring, are due by April 14, 2025, signifying that substantial, formally planned workforce reductions are imminent, replacing earlier ad-hoc methods.

The administration is also reportedly considering slashing NSF's annual budget from approximately $9 billion down to about $3–4 billion. Such a drop would significantly impact the agency's capacity to manage current and future research grants. **T**hese drastic cuts remain unconfirmed rumors, likely pertaining to future fiscal years (FY26 and beyond) rather than the enacted FY25 CR funding level. NSF has not officially commented on these reports. While NSF has not officially commented on the precise scale of layoffs or budget cuts, lawmakers, including Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), have sought for clarification regarding reports involving staff reductions as high as 50%. In addition, federal employee unions have also filed lawsuits to halt the buyout program.

Universities and state governments also secured a temporary injunction on February 10 against a proposed 15% overhead cost cap for research grants, according to CalMatters.org. A follow-up hearing on February 21 will determine whether that cap remains blocked. University leaders claim that such cuts would lead to widespread layoffs and lab closures, echoing reporting from The Guardian and other outlets. Today's hearing on the 15% overhead cost cap is underway, with stakeholders awaiting the judge's decision which could have significant implications for research funding. It has become clear this controversial 15% mandatory cap on Facilities and Administration (F&A)/indirect costs was an NIH-specific policy proposal. Following the February 21 hearing, the temporary block was extended and later converted in early March into a nationwide preliminary injunction, preventing NIH from enforcing the cap while legal challenges proceed. This issue does not apply to NSF's standard indirect cost policies, which allow negotiated rates or an optional 15% *de minimis* rate for certain organizations without a negotiated rate.

Key administration figures of the current administration have criticized NSF's support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The NSF has scrubbed multiple DEI references from its website, including a 2022 announcement of the appointment of a chief diversity officer. NSF continues to face intense political pressure regarding DEI, primarily through Senator Cruz's ongoing

investigation and database targeting specific grants. Such pressures have prompted internal compliance reviews mandated by executive orders. NSF has acknowledged awareness but has not issued a specific public rebuttal to the Cruz database methodology or findings.

Operational disruptions within NSF

Suspension of grants and salary payments: NSF leadership responded by pausing new grant awards and, in some cases, temporarily delaying salary payments to scientists and administrative staff. Researchers whose grants were already in progress suddenly found themselves in limbo—uncertain whether they could continue paying their students, postdocs, or lab technicians. While grant processing has officially resumed, the backlog from the January freeze caused delays in disbursements. As noted earlier, official processes have resumed, but significant strain and potential delays persist due to staffing reductions and compliance activities.

Targeted workforce reductions: The Office of Personnel Management first targeted probationary employees as they were deemed easier to remove. Some were offered a buyout, a program that was temporarily put on pause, according to The Washington Post. As detailed above, the targeting of probationary staff was largely reversed via reinstatements following legal challenges. Yet intermittent experts were permanently terminated, approximately 120 staff accepted voluntary buyouts, and the agency is now under mandate to develop formal plans for large-scale RIFs via the ARP process, indicating further significant reductions are planned. Sources within NSF indicate that further rounds of layoffs may target specific departments or programs deemed lower priority by the administration, as Wired has noted.

With an annual budget of $9–10 billion (prior to 2025 cuts), the NSF has historically funded roughly 25% of federally supported basic research at 1,800 institutions in the United States. In FY2023 alone, NSF provided some 11,000 awards that supported more than 350,000 researchers, postdoctoral fellows, teachers, and students nationwide.

Prior FY 2025 budget request from NSF

Abbreviation	Directorate / Account	FY 2024 Enacted Budget ($ millions)	FY 2025 Request ($ millions)	Change ($ millions)	Change (%)
BIO	Directorate for Biological Sciences	844.91	862.93	18.02	2.1%
CISE	Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering	1,035.90	1,067.58	31.68	3.1%
ENG	Directorate for Engineering	797.57	808.14	10.57	1.3%

Abbreviation	Directorate / Account	FY 2024 Enacted Budget ($ millions)	FY 2025 Request ($ millions)	Change ($ millions)	Change (%)
GEO	Directorate for Geosciences	1,591.79	1,662.50	70.71	4.4%
GEO: OPP	Office of Polar Programs (within GEO)	538.62	588.83	50.21	9.3%
U.S. Antarctic Logistics Activities	U.S. Antarctic Logistics Activities	94.20	106.00	11.80	12.5%
MPS	Directorate for Mathematical and Physical Sciences	1,659.95	1,681.63	21.68	1.3%
SBE	Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences	309.06	320.41	11.35	3.7%
TIP	Directorate for Technology, Innovation, and Partnerships	664.15	900.00	235.85	35.5%
SBIR/STTR	Small Business Innovation Research/Small Business Technology Transfer programs	266.54	279.21	12.67	4.8%
OCRSSP	Office of the Chief of Research Security Strategy and Policy	9.85	15.52	5.67	57.6%
OISE	Office of International Science and Engineering	68.43	68.43	0.00	0.0%
IA	Integrative Activities	531.39	518.69	-12.70	-2.4%

Abbreviation	Directorate / Account	FY 2024 Enacted Budget ($ millions)	FY 2025 Request ($ millions)	Change ($ millions)	Change (%)
U.S. Arctic Research Commission	U.S. Arctic Research Commission	1.75	1.78	0.03	1.7%
Mission Support Services	Mission Support Services	116.27	137.71	21.44	18.4%
Research & Related Activities[2]	Research & Related Activities	7,631.02	8,045.32	414.30	5.4%
STEM Education[2]	STEM Education	1,229.28	1,300.00	70.72	5.8%
Major Res. Equip. & Facil. Construction	Major Research Equipment & Facilities Construction	187.23	300.00	112.77	60.2%
Agency Operations & Award Mgmt.	Agency Operations & Award Management	463.00	504.00	41.00	8.9%
Office of Inspector General	Office of Inspector General	23.39	28.46	5.07	21.7%
National Science Board	National Science Board	5.09	5.22	0.13	2.6%
Total, NSF Discretionary Funding	Total, NSF Discretionary Funding	9,539.01	10,183.00	643.99	6.8%
Advancing Scientific Discovery: Artificial Intelligence	Advancing Scientific Discovery: Artificial Intelligence	–	50.00	50.00	N/A

Abbreviation	Directorate / Account	FY 2024 Enacted Budget ($ millions)	FY 2025 Request ($ millions)	Change ($ millions)	Change (%)
STEM Education – H-1B Visa	STEM Education – H-1B Visa	192.54	138.93	-53.61	-27.8%
Donations	Donations	40.00	40.00	–	–
Total, NSF Mandatory Funding	Total, NSF Mandatory Funding	232.54	228.93	-3.61	-1.6%
Total, NSF Budgetary Resources	Total, NSF Budgetary Resources	9,771.55	10,411.93	640.37	6.6%