

Union of Concerned Scientists

Science for a Healthy Planet and Safer World

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The Trump Administration Has Undermined a Nationwide Conservation Program



What happened: In direct contrast to instructions from Congress, the Trump administration has defunded a successful science-based conservation program known as Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs), causing 16 of the 22 LCCs to be eliminated or placed on indefinite hiatus. LCCs are governmental research centers located across the US that integrate science-based information on climate change and other stressors to better conserve and protect natural and cultural resources.

Why it matters: LCCs provide a unique service by bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders – federal, state, and local governments, universities, non-profits, Tribes and First Nations, and interested public and private organizations – to collaborate together on the best practices for landscape-level, conservation objectives. No other initiative has the scope or ability to replace this

service. The efforts undertaken by LCCs have resulted in significant science-based actions, such as: listing a native Hawaiian forest bird as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act; getting residents in flood-prone parts of the Gulf coast discounts on their flood insurance; and creating a website that shows data visualizations and maps on the effects of climate change in California. Cutting off the funding sources of LCCs will deprive the research community, decision-makers, and the public from obtaining needed information on climate change, land use, and conservation science.

Scientists and officials from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) shared confidential information with the [Guardian](#), revealing that the Trump administration – seemingly against the wishes of Congress – has defunded [Landscape Conservation Cooperatives](#) (LCCs), research centers across the country which provide invaluable science capacity and technical expertise to big picture issues such as climate change, flooding, and species extinction. Only 6 of the 22 research centers are operational now, and the operational 6 centers are functioning primarily due to external funding sources. By defunding these research centers and forcing most of them to close, the administration is depriving scientists, decision-makers, and the public from the rich scientific research and collaboration opportunities generated by one of the most successful conservation programs in the country. A public affairs specialist at FWS confirmed with the [Pacific Standard Magazine](#) that capacity and funding for LCCs have been practically eliminated: “[The FWS] no longer provides dedicated staff, administrative functions, and funding for the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives,” though the research centers will still be asked to “support efforts to gather data, identify and pursue science tools, and form and engage partnerships to address shared conservation priorities for the 21st century.”

LCCs are now considered a successful and important conservation network to the scientific community. They engage in a [broad spectrum of issues](#) including climate resiliency, traditional ecological knowledge, and energy security. LCCs have sponsored hundreds of research and planning projects; engaged in public outreach; disseminated reports, data, and new methodologies; and over [40 peer-reviewed scientific papers](#) have been published thanks to the work of LCCs. In 2015, the [National Academy of Sciences](#) (NAS) conducted a review of LCCs and found that they were “unique in that no other federal program is designed to address landscape conservation needs at a national scale, for all natural and cultural resources, in a way that bridges research and management efforts.” The NAS committee further praised LCCs for its accomplishments, its progress towards “advancing science for conservation,” and asserted that LCCs are addressing “a national need” with its landscape approach to conservation. A [2018 paper](#) published in the journal *BioScience* concluded that “the LCC system is the most promising government-sponsored system of conservation planning based on ecoregional patterns in existence.”

The Trump administration previously tried and failed to cut all funding to LCCs during its proposed 2017 budget. In the end, \$12.5 million was allocated for “cooperative landscape conservation,” money that Congress seems to have intended to fund LCCs. Betty McCollum, chair of the House interior-environment appropriations subcommittee, said the reports that LCCs were being defunded were “[disturbing](#).”

According to the [Guardian](#), LCCs across the country began to learn that they would no longer

receive federal support in 2017. One FWS scientist noted that the funding cuts corresponded with an unprecedented political review of scientific research by officials from the Department of Interior (DOI). During the review “it was known that nothing associated with LCCs, would be funded” and that they “basically had to kind of wind everything down.” The political review sought to align the funding of scientific research with the [priorities of the Trump administration](#) and it was administered by a [high school friend of the former DOI secretary Ryan Zinke](#).

The Trump administration’s decision to slash the funding earmarked by Congress to LCCs is a chilling example of how the administration continues a pattern of shuttering or severely defunding federal programs that promote basic scientific research. Previously, the administration has illegally withheld funds from the Department of Energy’s (DOE) [innovative R&D energy program](#); forced a DOE [tropical research program](#) that dealt with climate change to close seven years early; wastefully terminated scientific research grants on [teen pregnancy prevention](#) research that were halfway through the grant period; and forced the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to shut down a federal database that compiled the [best medical guidelines](#) out there.

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