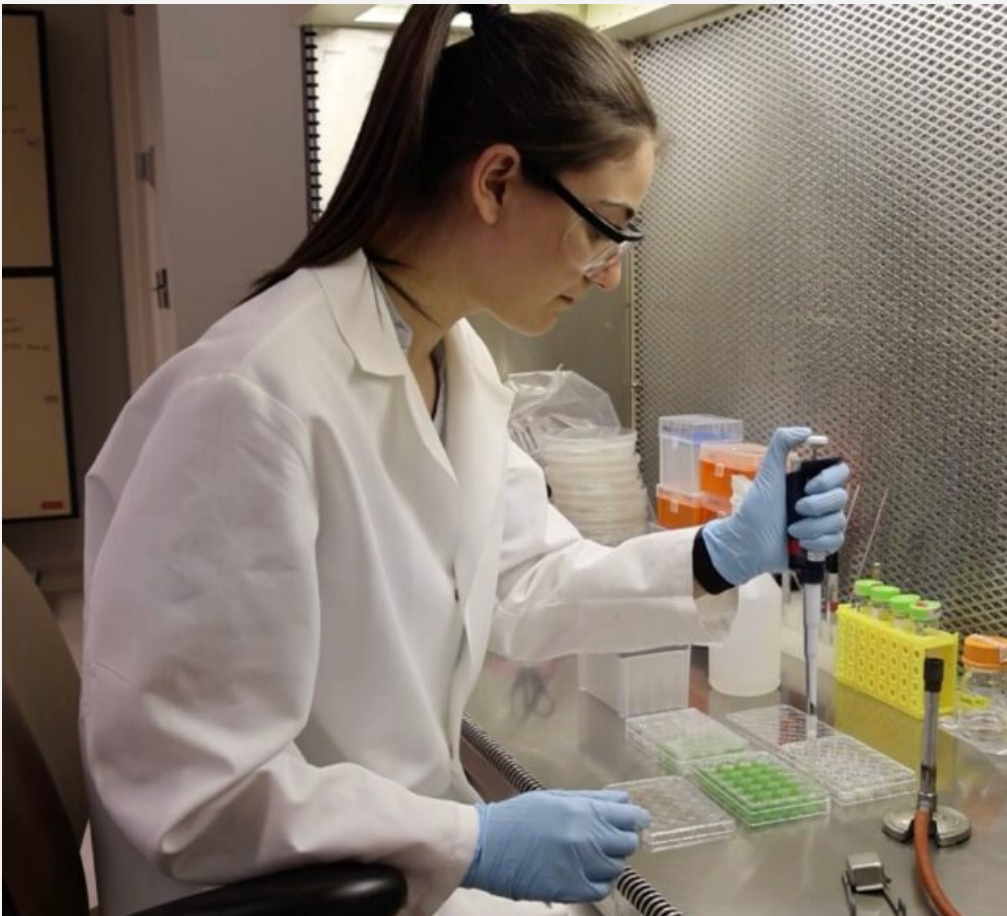


EXCLUSIVE

National Science Foundation suspends salary payments, leaving researchers unable to pay their bills

NSF payment system remained offline despite the lifting of Trump administration funding freeze



Julia Van Etten, an NSF fellow, didn't get her paycheck on Tuesday.

Courtesy Julia Van Etten ^



By [Eric Boodman](#)

Jan. 30, 2025

General Assignment Reporter

One scientist texted his landlord to say February rent would be late. Another wasn't able to pay her credit card bill. Yet another wondered how much longer he could afford his mortgage.

These were some of the effects of President Trump's federal funding freeze on the postdoctoral researchers who rely on grants from the National Science Foundation. Though a judge blocked that suspension on Tuesday before it could take effect, and the administration rescinded the memo that ordered it on Wednesday, on Thursday the NSF's online payment system was still down, throwing lives into uncertainty. An NSF email seen by STAT suggested salaries had been suspended to "ensure only eligible activities" are funded.

ADVERTISEMENT

"If the freeze is not stopped, I might lose my house," said one biologist doing a postdoctoral fellowship in the southeast, who spoke on condition that neither his name nor his state of residence be used, out of fear of retaliation. He said he had enough in his bank account to last until March, but had no idea how long the pay stoppage might last.

Bolton Howes, a geologist who studies how climatic changes some 56 million years ago shifted the course of rivers, has a similarly thin financial cushion. When he woke up on Thursday to find that his pay was still frozen, he reached out to his landlord to say that his February rent would be coming late. She was understanding, he said; she'd been dealing with issues in her own work caused by the funding freeze. He has an emergency fund that could cover a single month's rent, but he was reluctant to use it, in case he faced an unexpected expense like a broken-down car or a medical bill. "If I were to get sick, it would be a disaster," said Howes, an NSF-funded fellow with a joint appointment at both the University of Washington and Western Washington University.

"I'm going to eat food this month, but that's because I have a credit card," he went on. "Like, I'm not worried about going hungry." But he was worried that if it didn't get sorted out, he'd be dealing with debt.

ADVERTISEMENT

RELATED



Universities fear Trump is using lucrative research grants as leverage to dismantle their DEI programs

When asked about the situation by email, NSF media officer Michael England wrote, “Our top priority is resuming our funding actions and services to the research community and our stakeholders. We are working expeditiously to conduct a comprehensive review of our projects, programs and activities to be compliant with the existing executive orders.”

That suggested that the agency would not be paying any of its grantees until it determined that their work did not conflict with President Trump’s executive orders, including those dismantling diversity initiatives and rolling back protections of transgender rights. England declined to answer any further questions.

“We just have no idea when we’ll be paid,” said Julia Van Etten, an NSF fellow at both Rutgers University and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, who studies how DNA gets transferred between microbes. “It could be today, with the website going back up. It could be six months from now. We are under the impression that as soon as the NSF is done investigating us for DEI or whatever, we will get paid again. I don’t think my grant is gone.”

But she pointed out that many in her position have just finished their Ph.D.s. “Most of us are living paycheck to paycheck, so even getting a paycheck a week late is like a huge deal to us,” she said. She’d been expecting a paycheck on Tuesday, with which she’d been planning to pay off a credit card bill. Now, unable to pay it, the amount she owes could grow.

As jobs go, certain directly funded NSF fellowships are unusual. While some NSF programs entail a set payment schedule, in these fellowships, recipients can technically withdraw their entire year’s worth of pay in one fell swoop, as soon as they get the grant. But recipients are told that it’s customary for them to take it out bit by bit, as a monthly salary. That’s why different fellows might be on slightly different pay schedules, and why the biologist in the southeast has more of a cushion at the moment than he might otherwise: Late in 2024, he’d withdrawn more of his salary than usual because he feared his pay might be interrupted by a government shutdown.

ADVERTISEMENT

RELATED



FDA purges material on clinical trial diversity from its site, showing stakes of Trump DEI ban

So when the members of a Slack group for NSF-funded postdocs heard about the federal funding freeze early this week, many figured they might be able to give themselves some financial stability through the confusion by logging onto the payment portal and requesting a payment before the freeze went into effect as planned at the end of the business day on Tuesday. According to Van Etten, the thinking was: “Hopefully, if we can request the remaining year’s salary before 5 p.m., then maybe this will be a non-issue. If it gets enforced and takes months to resolve, at least we’ll have our salary so we can just continue to work as normal.”

She said she knows of hundreds of postdoctoral researchers who did something like that, herself among them. But then minutes before 5, when the freeze would’ve gone into effect had a judge not intervened, an NSF official emailed grant recipients, saying that the system through which their payments were processed would be put on pause. “You will be receiving cancellation notices for any pending payment transactions to enable resubmission, pending additional guidance, to ensure only eligible activities are included in future payment requests,” the email read.

Sure enough, on Thursday, another email arrived from NSF saying that all transactions submitted on Tuesday had been cancelled, and that grantees were encouraged to review the rules before resubmitting once the payment system was back online.

How exactly one office can continue enacting a funding freeze that was blocked in court remains unclear, though as [NPR has reported](#), the NSF is congressionally mandated to look at how its grants improve the participation of groups underrepresented in science, creating a possible conflict with the president’s executive order. Other agencies have taken different tacks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sent out a memo ordering the termination of all “programs, personnel, activities, or contracts promoting ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion.’” As [Science reported](#), the Department of Energy’s Office of Science ended the requirement that applicants include a plan for promoting inclusive and equitable research.

ADVERTISEMENT

In addition to the widespread confusion, NSF-funded researchers also wondered how exactly it would be determined whether their projects involved subjects that were now forbidden. As the biologist in the southeast put it, “How careful is the knife going to be?”

There were other worries looming as well — about American science falling behind, about the United States experiencing the sort of brain drain it had previously benefitted from. For many, though, the most immediate concern was getting paid.

This story has been updated to include new information.

DONALD TRUMP

SCIENTISTS

[Submit a correction request](#) [Reprints](#)



Eric Boodyman

General Assignment Reporter



Eric Boodyman focuses on narrative features, exploring the startling ways that science and medicine affect people’s lives.

RECOMMENDED

EXCLUSIVE

CDC advisers push agency to explain data removal, say when info will be restored

By [Usha Lee McFarling](#)

EXCLUSIVE

With little fanfare, Biden administration stacked vaccine advisory committee with new members

EXCLUSIVE

Trump administration cancels meetings of health technology advisory committee

EXCLUSIVE

Biotech accelerator Curie.Bio raises \$340 million for a new seed fund

EXCLUSIVE

In RFK Jr.'s emails to his niece, a trail of vaccine criticism

SUBSCRIBER PICKS

1 NIH clarifies restrictions on staff after Trump's broad freeze sparked chaos

By [Sarah Oweremohle](#)

2 Private emails show RFK Jr. making false claims about Covid-19 shots, linking vaccines to autism

By [Rick Berke](#) and [Sarah Oweremohle](#)

3 The 7 big topics RFK Jr. addressed during a fiery confirmation hearing

By [Rachel Cohrs Zhang](#), [Sarah Oweremohle](#), and [Isabella Cueto](#)

4 'Incredibly irresponsible': Hims Super Bowl ad downplays risks of compounded drugs

By [Katie Palmer](#)

STAT

**Reporting from the frontiers
of health and medicine**[^ BACK TO TOP](#)**COMPANY**[About](#)[Our Team](#)[Contact Us](#)[Careers](#)[Diversity & Inclusion](#)[Our Awards](#)[Advertise With Us](#)[STAT Brand Studio](#)[Supporters](#)[Licensing Stories](#)**ACCOUNT**[STAT+](#)[Group Subscriptions](#)[FAQ](#)[My Account](#)[Log In](#)[Subscribe](#)**MORE**[Events](#)[Newsletters](#)[Reports](#)[App](#)[Podcasts](#)[Community](#)

