

House subcommittee holds hearing on spending restrictions during shutdown

February 6, 2019

On February 6, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies held its first hearing of the 116th Congress to review how the recent government shutdown affected agency spending.

According to a report from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the five-week shutdown delayed approximately \$18 billion in federal spending and suspended some federal services. As a result of this reduced economic activity, CBO estimates a loss of about \$3 billion (0.02 percent) of gross domestic product impacting the overall U.S. economy, with much more significant underlying effects on individual businesses and workers.

Subcommittee Chair Betty McCollum (D-MN) began the hearing by emphasizing the importance of Congress protecting federal agencies, and reviewing the legal framework surrounding the executive branch's decision to continue operating certain agencies, like the National Park Service (NPS), in the absence of appropriations during a shutdown.

Sam Berger, who works for the Center for American Progress, testified that the Interior Department's decision to keep the parks open with insufficient staffing resulted in an accumulation of trash and human waste, safety risks to visitors, and damage to the parks themselves.

Other agencies that experienced a lapse in funding, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), did not continue to operate as NPS did during the shutdown.

Although January is ordinarily a crucial time for some of those agencies (e.g., NSF) to consider scientists' grant proposals, they could not provide new funding or review new grant proposals for the duration of the shutdown. As a result, many current and future research projects were put on hold, impacting data collection, research decisions, student funding opportunities, and other agency operations. According to Benjamin Corb, director of public affairs for the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, NSF had provided \$42 million of funding by January 8, 2018, in stark contrast to \$0 allocated around the same time in 2019.

Christine McEntee, executive director of the American Geophysical Union, argued that the shutdown put American lives and scientific progress at risk, since it stalled much of the ongoing scientific research on extreme weather events and natural disasters, thus creating gaps in what would otherwise have been continuous data.

After the shutdown, many agencies posted updates regarding the resumption of their operations following the shutdown. All federal agencies are now funded until September 30, 2019—the end of fiscal year 2019.

Sources: Library of Congress; National Science Foundation; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations; U.S. Senate, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources; The Washington Post.
