

EDUCATION

UT-Austin researchers told to halt work on \$6.1M worth of projects due to Trump orders



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Researchers at the University of Texas have been ordered to stop, or pause, work on at least nine major projects as a result of executive orders from President Donald Trump that restrict federal money for initiatives that support foreign aid and diversity, equity and inclusion.

A list of the projects, obtained by the American-Statesman via open records request, show a total of \$6.1 million in funding on hold from agencies including NASA, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Energy Department for a variety of projects – from improvements to malaria vaccinations and flood mapping to crop development in developing countries. Another involves advocacy for underserved communities in Austin who have been disproportionately affected by climate change.

Karen Adler, a spokeswoman for UT's research office, said Thursday that two of the stop-work orders have been lifted. That leaves seven projects, which were set to receive a combined \$3.3 million in federal funding, in limbo.

Adler declined to comment on the effect of the stop-work orders.

But U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, a Democrat who has represented the Austin area for years, said the impact to UT is "very far reaching" and that he fears that funding for even more research projects could be nixed if the Trump administration continues to slash spending on anything that doesn't align with its stated policy priorities.

"UT is one of the leading research institutions in the country," Doggett said. "There's really no justification given for why these particular grants and others have been singled out."

"It adds such uncertainty that it affects not only these particular research projects but research that other scientists would do that could be beneficial to our families," he added.

Mum's the word at most federal agencies

The grants date back to 2021, but half were awarded just last year. Only one of the seven projects still under a stop-work order was flagged for a temporary, rather than indefinite, pause.

A stop-work order is a legal notice from a governing agency to cease all activity on a project, typically for a legal violation or urgent problem. In some cases, projects resume after a review or issue resolution, but the fate of the UT initiatives remains unclear.

A federal judge last week granted a temporary injunction against the administration's freeze on foreign aid spending and prohibition on agency enforcement of stop-work orders, but, as of Thursday, UT had not heard from the agencies about a return of funds for the USAID projects, Adler confirmed.

The Energy Department was the only federal agency that responded to the Statesman's request for comment on the stop-work orders. A spokesman, Ben Dietderich, said in an emailed statement that the department "is complying with recent court orders related to funding."

He did not say what court orders he was referring to and did not respond to follow-up questions. But Trump's executive orders, related to DEI and other issues, are facing a variety of legal challenges. Judges have temporarily halted some of the orders, including a proposed 15% cap on funding for indirect research expenses at the National Institutes of Health, while allowing others to proceed.

UT researchers weigh in

Three UT researchers who received stop-work orders told the Statesman that the directives have sparked confusion, frustration and fear about whether additional projects will be targeted.

"The decision to use a stop-work order has created chaos, is shortsighted and is resulting in real suffering and harm for people living in extremely challenging contexts," said Erin Lentz, an associate professor in the LBJ School of Public Affairs who received stop-work orders for

two USAID projects. "There is a lot of misinformation about USAID and about foreign assistance. Foreign assistance saves lives, and it is comparatively a very small portion of the U.S. budget."

One of Lentz's projects aimed to improve food safety and eradicate poverty by improving peanut production for farmers in developing countries in Africa. The other looked to develop real-time monitoring systems to evaluate humanitarian needs in Somalia and Congo to "best prevent suffering and unnecessary loss of life," Lentz said.

Katherine Romanak, a research professor in the Jackson School of Geosciences who works in the Bureau of Economic Geology, received a temporary stop-work order from the Energy Department on a \$1.7 million project that would have helped educate affected communities about carbon capture and storage, a process that removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in an effort to curb climate change.

It has prevented her from recruiting the four to 10 students she typically hires, costing the students learning opportunities and the bureau talent, she said.

"Nothing makes sense. Nothing is thoughtful or targeted or explained. It's all just haphazard," Romanak said. "The bottom line is, nobody knows what's going on, and so nobody is moving because there's too much uncertainty."

Under the Biden administration, the project added DEI components, she said, but it has always critically done "education and outreach" to communities affected by carbon capture projects. She worries the two will get "conflated" with DEI and terminated, stopping the team from countering misinformation about carbon capture in communities.

Alex Karner, an associate professor in community and regional planning, speaking in his personal capacity, said he was ordered to stop work on a project that involved analyzing the challenges faced by different groups in accessing transportation.

The stop-work order from the National Academy of Sciences, which the Statesman reviewed, said it was "not a judgement of your work performance." The National Academy of Sciences is not a federal agency, but it was created through an act of Congress to advise the federal government on scientific research.

Karner said he had already conducted 40 interviews, collected data and had focus groups with several dozen advocates from nonprofit organizations, and he worries about what this

could mean for the future of his research, which has sought to ensure transportation projects benefit all community members.

"We've been recognizing that transportation access is a real barrier for people with disabilities, for trans people, for queer people, for black folks, for brown folks ... and we were making progress identifying specific barriers that those populations face," Karner said.

Frustrations and appeals to Texas congressional delegation

The news comes as UT seeks to become the world's highest-impact public university through its 10-year strategic plan released in 2022 and crafted under President Jay Hartzell.

Karner said he has been frustrated that the university hasn't responded more forcefully, such as through litigation, as 16 universities, including the University of Pennsylvania and the entire University of California System, have in their lawsuit against the NIH for cutting supplementary funding for grants to cover indirect costs like administrative staff and lab utility bills.

"There's no sense that something has fundamentally changed or the entire research enterprise is at risk," he said of UT leadership. "There's no sense that they grasp the potential consequences for the university of these cascading changes and impacts that are coming down."

Lentz, Karner and Romanak said they have not received any updates beyond the stop-work order.

UT spokesperson Mike Rosen told the American-Statesman last Friday that the university has alerted its entire congressional delegation to the positive effect UT's research has on its global impact and competitiveness.

Doggett said he plans to inquire about the grants.

"As with so much of the Trump administration, this seems to be more chaos than thought," Doggett said. "We want to bring specific issues to the attention of someone in the administration who's interested in the outcome of this research and will remove any limitations that are being placed on funding."

This story was updated to add a video.

