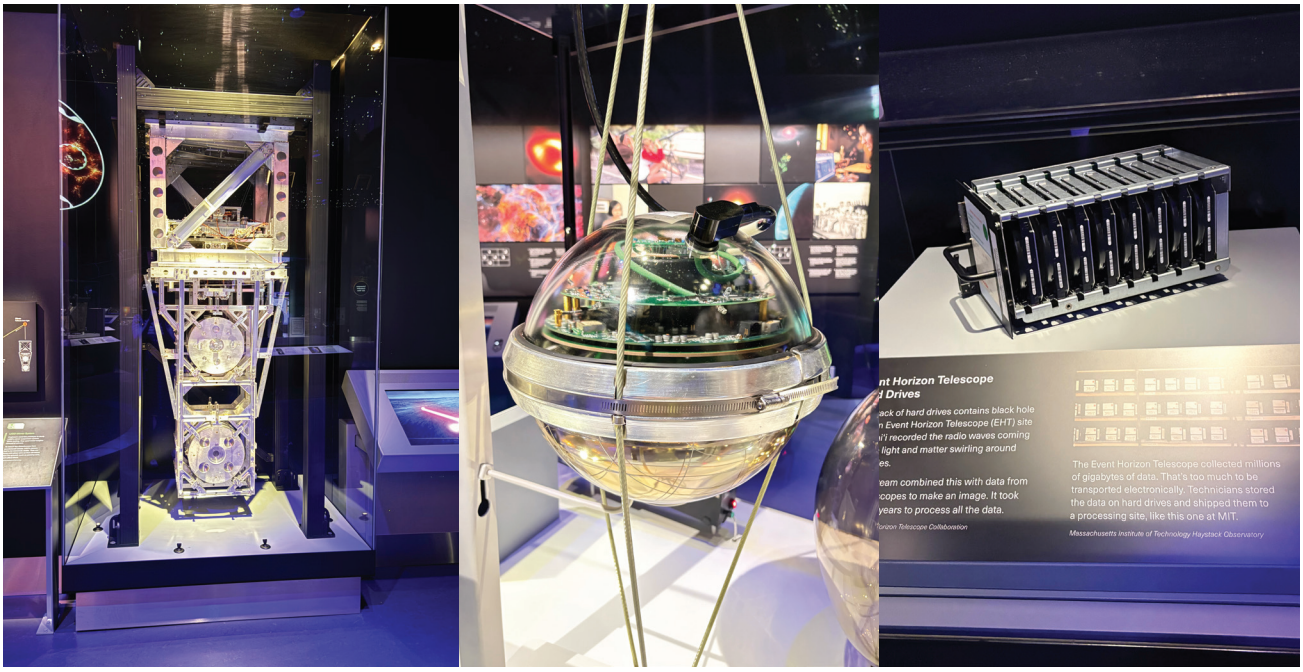
The shrinking NSF support for the physical sciences

The agency awarded fewer grants in the physical sciences in fiscal year 2026 than most years in its history.

By Jenessa Duncombe



One of the National Air and Space Museum's new galleries features several MPS-funded artifacts, including, from left, a test mirror assembly for the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory, a detector for the IceCube Neutrino Observatory, and a hard drive from the Event Horizon Telescope. (Photos by Jenessa Duncombe.)

A new gallery in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum's northeast corner holds 21st-century artifacts from astronomy's major firsts, like the detections of gravitational waves and neutrinos from outside our solar system. The gallery also comes with a named sponsor: the National Science Foundation.

"A lot of the NSF-related things are back here," says Shauna Edson, an astronomy educator at the museum, as she walks through the Smithsonian's *U.S. National Science Foundation Discovering Our Universe* gallery. "One of my favorites is the Event Horizon Telescope. We have one of the hard drives that carried a piece of that first black hole image."

But beneath the celebration, the gallery opened at a strained time for its sponsor. NSF has been quietly pulling back its financial support for the physical sciences for the second year in a row, despite nearly flat Congressional appropriations. Publicly available grant data reveal that NSF issued noticeably fewer grants in FY 2026 than the average for 2000–24. The changes may be felt the most acutely for university-based physical sciences researchers, whose primary federal funder is NSF.

The physical sciences at NSF

NSF was created in 1950 to, among other pursuits, "promote the progress of science." Its mathematical

and physical sciences directorate (MPS) is the agency's prime supporter of the physical sciences. In recent years, MPS has been the foundation's first- or second-highest funded directorate.

MPS funds research in astronomical sciences, chemistry, materials, mathematics, and physics. Its grants provide funds for individuals and small groups. It also supports large research centers, technology development, and student training.

MPS issued its first grant in 1963, according to NSF's publicly available award data. Within a decade, it was awarding several hundred grants a year. By the 1980s, it surpassed 1000 grants per year, and it passed 2000 grants per year by the 2000s. NSF issued an anomalously high number of grants in 2009 because of the economic stimulus package during the Great Recession.

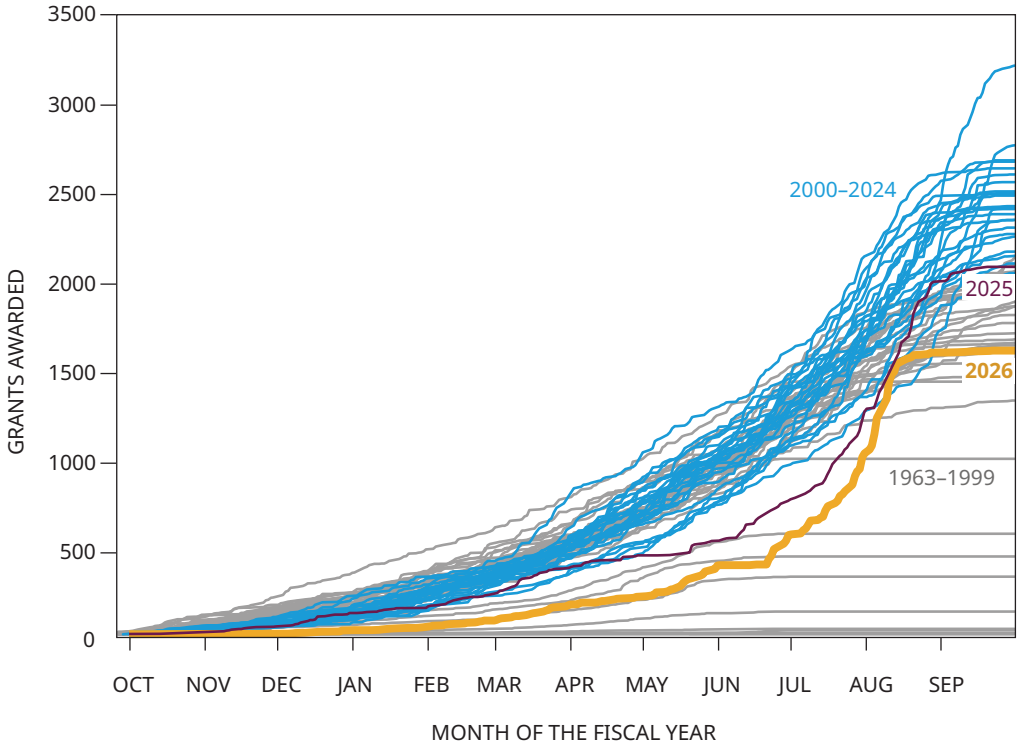
An unusual year

Against the high-water marks seen in the chart, the low number of awards in FY 2026 stands out. The agency awarded 34% fewer grants for the physical sciences in FY 2026 than its average for 2000–24.

The cuts to MPS's scientific areas happened unevenly, according to an analysis by *FYI*, the science policy news service at the American Institute of Physics. (AIP is the publisher of *Physics Today*.) For instance, the number of astronomy grants awarded by early September was less than half the average for FY 2021–24. The number of physics grants, however, was down by about 10%.

The lower-than-average number of grants by MPS is at odds with NSF's FY 2026 budget. The NSF budget approved by Congress and signed by the president decreased by only 3% from FY 2025. And in a detailed report accompanying the FY 2026 spending bill, Congress instructed NSF that no directorate should receive more than a 5% funding cut from FY 2024 enacted levels. The agency withheld approximately one-fifth of its research funding in FY 2026, amounting to $1.4 billion, according to reporting by *The New York Times*. When asked by *PT* about the MPS budget, NSF spokesperson Michael England declined to comment.

NSF has two years to spend its fiscal year appropriations, so unspent money from FY 2026 could be tapped through September 2027. But doing so would break the norm, says senior adviser Kei Koizumi at the



The cumulative number of grants awarded in the mathematical and physical sciences directorate over the course of the fiscal year has shrunk for the second year in a row. (Figure by Jenessa Duncombe and Masie Chong; data from NSF and Grant Witness.)

Historical comparison

2410
Average annual MPS grants, FY 2000–24

1580
MPS grants, FY 2026

34%
Fewer grants in FY 2026 than the FY 2000–24 average

$1.4 Billion
Research funding unspent by NSF in FY 2026

Union of Concerned Scientists. "Traditionally, it's been obligated within the first fiscal year."

News stories by *Science* and *Nature* suggests that NSF is reducing support in the physical sciences and several other disciplines to use the funding for other priorities. Program managers within MPS had been told to hold off on awarding new grants, even for proposals that have passed peer review. NSF discouraged MPS program managers from telling principal investigators that MPS's budget is shrinking.

NSF spokesperson England tells *PT* that the agency's award timing during FY 2026 was impacted by lapsed federal funding last fall. On the matter of the lower-than-average number of grants awarded by MPS in FY 2026, England says, "Focusing on longer awards with larger funding amounts and a broader span of science and engineering topics empowers NSF to reduce administrative burden on researchers and broaden access to funding opportunities."

Unique role of NSF

Other federal agencies fund more of the physical sciences than NSF. The Department of Energy's Office of Science is the largest supporter of physical sciences research in the US, often followed by NASA, according to data from the US National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. But much of DOE's funding goes to national laboratories, and NASA's money is more likely to go to businesses than to universities. In contrast, NSF was the largest federal funder of the physical sciences in higher education for all but one fiscal year since 2003.

US and international physical scientists are worried about the federal funding landscape, according to a survey by AIP. The survey, conducted over the summer, had more than 2000 responses. Approximately one-fifth of respondents said that they lost funding due to federal policy changes. About three-fourths said federal funding for science was an important issue impacting the science and engineering enterprise.

"NSF has this very important role of supporting university-based physics research," says Koizumi. "Historically, the physical sciences, including mathematics, has been a very important part of [NSF's] portfolio."

For Edson of the National Air and Space Museum, the new gallery shows the evolution of astronomy and NSF's place in it. "Especially the ground-based astronomy, we can owe almost entirely to NSF support," says Edson. The gallery shows that "science has gone from a solitary pursuit into a team endeavor," she says. "And that requires varied expertise, cooperation, communication, and strong funding." PT

