

Challenges await NSF's next director

By Lindsay McKenzie and Clare Zhang

The White House formally nominated Jim O'Neill on 2 March to be the next director of NSF. Until recently, O'Neill was acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a position now assumed by Jay Bhattacharya, who also directs the National Institutes of Health. O'Neill worked for the Department of Health and Human Services during the George W. Bush administration and later became an investor, including for the Thiel Foundation's Breakout Labs, which funded early-stage commercialization of scientific research.

If confirmed by the Senate, O'Neill will head an agency that has undergone rapid change. NSF has been without a director since Sethuraman Panchanathan resigned in April 2025. Since then, the agency has seen staff cuts, grant terminations, grant-review process changes, a restructuring of its divisions and directorates, and a major reduction in the use of rotators—scientists, engineers, and educators who work at NSF on a temporary basis to help set funding priorities and evaluate grant proposals (see the 2022 *PT* article “Stepping into NSF” to read about working as a rotator).

At a February meeting of the National Science Board, which oversees NSF, Micah Cheatham, NSF's chief management officer, said the agency is seeking approval from the Trump administration to hire more staff because its current level of around 1300 employees is “too low.” Cheatham also shared plans to reduce the number of grant solicitations the agency offers and to speed up review processes.

Some NSF projects are experiencing construction delays, according to a Government Accountability Office report published in February. Of the seven major research infrastructure projects in various stages of development, four have fallen several months behind schedule since July of last year. All the delayed projects are still within budget, but some have been reduced in scope. NSF says labor shortages and budgetary uncertainty are contributing to the delays (see the May 2025 *PT* article “Trump defunds NSF construction budget”).

The agency is also operating without a headquarters. NSF vacated its former building in Arlington, Virginia, in January. But its new home, in a building a few blocks away, is not yet ready for staff. As a result, most NSF personnel are working remotely with no

concrete date set for when they will return to the office. Committee meetings that usually take place in person are being held virtually.

An NSF spokesperson says that work on the agency's new headquarters began shortly after the lease was signed in December 2025. The spokesperson adds that the agency “quickly established a presence in the building” and that NSF leadership and staff who are involved in outfitting it are on-site daily. NSF “is looking forward to fully occupying the building as quickly as possible,” the spokesperson says.

Layoffs hit National Laboratory of the Rockies

By Jacob Taylor and Lindsay McKenzie

At least 130 employees were laid off in February at the National Laboratory of the Rockies, previously known as the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). The dismissed staff had worked in research and operations roles, according to local news reports. The job losses follow a 10% budget cut to the Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, which is a major source of funding for the lab. They also come less than year after the lab laid off 114 employees.

According to its website, the lab employs nearly 4000 people, though it is unclear if that number accounts for the recent rounds of layoffs. Several Democratic members of Colorado's congressional delegation have spoken out against the dismissals.

DOE renamed the lab in December. In a press release, Assistant Secretary of Energy Audrey Robertson said the name change came about because “the energy crisis we face today is unlike the crisis that gave rise to NREL.” She added, “Our highest priority is to invest in the scientific capabilities that will restore American manufacturing, drive down costs, and help this country meet its soaring energy demand.”

The lab started as the Solar Energy Research Institute and opened in 1977 as part of the federal government's efforts to mitigate the effects of oil embargoes. The lab was renamed NREL in 1991 when it was absorbed into DOE's national lab system.

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