

NSF changes grant review requirements

By Lindsay McKenzie

NSF is reducing the number of external reviewers required for evaluating its grant proposals. Previous guidance required a minimum of three external reviewers for most grants. But a new policy, according to a 1 December memo to agency staff and obtained by *Science*, drops that requirement to two reviewers, and in some cases only one needs to come from outside the foundation. That and other changes to the agency's grant review process were also mentioned in a policy notice issued on 8 December.

According to the staff memo, the policy changes are intended to reduce the burden of the grant review process on NSF's staff. But some critics say the changes may reduce the agency's ability to select the best proposals.

The National Science Board, which oversees NSF, released a report around the same time that proposes multiple updates to NSF's grant review policy. The report's recommendations include aligning NSF's award portfolio with national priorities and inviting expert reviewers from a broader swath of industries, research institutions, and regions of the country. The board also recommends renaming the "broader impacts" criterion for grants as "societal benefits." The broader impacts review criterion is required by statute and includes diversity objectives.

Annual defense law includes research security measures

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Signed by President Trump in December, the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes several research-related provisions.

The law includes the Senate-proposed BIOSECURE Act, which bars agencies from contracting with or making grants

to biotechnology companies from "foreign adversary" nations, notably China. It also includes the 2026 Intelligence Authorization Act, which covers intelligence agencies and contains provisions relating to AI and biotechnology.

The NDAA also includes the Comprehensive Outbound Investment National Security Act, which calls for sanctions and regulations aimed at prohibiting investment in and private deals with Chinese, Cuban, Iranian, North Korean, Russian, and Venezuelan entities that are engaged in developing dual-use strategic technologies. The law lists semiconductors, AI, high-performance computing, and quantum information and hypersonic systems, and it allows for other technologies to be added in the future.

The NDAA features various provisions for nuclear energy and weapons, including one that calls for the creation of an advanced nuclear transition working group. Its goal is to advance the priorities laid out in a May executive order that aims to drive research into new reactor concepts for energy applications and to increase the deployment of reactors for both civilian and military uses.

The law also directs the Defense Department to produce reports and briefings on projects related to Trump's Golden Dome missile defense program. The architecture would consist of a vast array of ground- and space-based sensors and interceptors capable of protecting the entirety of US territory. The NDAA prohibits the department from developing Golden Dome capabilities that are not owned and operated by the armed forces.

Several notable proposals failed to make it into the law's final text. The SAFE Research Act, a research security bill in the House version of the NDAA, was not included. It would have prohibited federal grants to any researchers and institutions that have broadly defined affiliations with "hostile foreign entities."

A White House-backed proposal to block states from regulating AI also did not make it into the NDAA. Trump preemptively signed an executive order in December that aims to create a similar prohibition.

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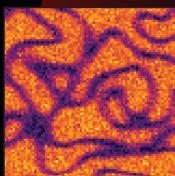


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