

US budget deal averts government shutdown

Bill funds operations until 11 December, with flat funding for science agencies.

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Update, 1 October 2015: President Obama signed the budget bill into law late on 30 September.

US science agencies can relax — for now. On 30 September, the US Congress approved a temporary budget that will fund government operations until mid-December. That heads [the threat of a shutdown](#) with just hours to spare before the end of the fiscal year.

The bill would extend [2015 funding levels](#) for most agencies, setting aside roughly US\$30.2 billion for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), \$18.0 billion for NASA and \$7.3 billion for the National Science Foundation (NSF). President Barack Obama is expected to sign the measure into law before the 2016 budget year begins on 1 October.

Overall, the spending deal is “about as run-of-the-mill as you can get”, says Jennifer Zeitzer, director of legislative relations at the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology in Bethesda, Maryland. But she is concerned about what will happen when the legislation expires on 11 December.

Lawmakers have not resolved an ongoing dispute about government funding for Planned Parenthood, a non-profit group that offers reproductive health care. That issue nearly derailed negotiations over the budget deal, and could crop up again when Congress resumes spending negotiations later this year.

The temporary spending deal simply “kicks the can down the road to December 11”, says Michael Lubell, director of public affairs at the American Physical Society in Washington DC. If legislators cannot strike deals on Planned Parenthood and other contentious topics, he says, “odds are better than 50–50 that the government will shut down”.

The [most recent government shutdown](#), in October 2013, [lasted for 16 days](#).

Stuck in a rut

Operating under the temporary funding measure, known as a continuing resolution, carries its own drawbacks. Agencies cannot start new programmes or end old ones unless Congress has included a specific exemption for a programme in the spending bill.

For example, the spending legislation includes a provision to ensure that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration can adjust its budget to prevent delays in the development of the Joint Polar Satellite System, a series of weather and climate probes.

But the measure does not include such an exception for the Precision Medicine Initiative (PMI). This programme, proposed in January, seeks to collect [genetic, physiological and other health data](#) from one million volunteers over the next two decades. The presidential administration is seeking \$215 million for the programme in 2016, but there is no money for it in the temporary spending legislation. The NIH says that it still plans to solicit grant applications for the PMI in the next few months.

Meanwhile, social and Earth scientists may be cheered by what the temporary legislation does not include: language championed by the House of Representatives that would have [cut the NSF’s social-science and geoscience](#) programmes by roughly 16%.

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