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NEWS | 26 June 2026 | Clarification [27 June 2026](#)

Inside the new political screening that's stalling NIH grants

Mandatory reviews by top health officials and checks for 235 disfavoured terms have left hundreds of vetted grant applications in administrative limbo.

By [Max Kozlov](#)

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The US National Institutes of Health has seen grant applications held up by extra layers of scrutiny. Credit: Mark Wilson/Newsmakers/Getty

Hundreds of [grant applications to the US National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH) are being held up at any given time by unprecedented scrutiny after peer review. Some have been flagged by an algorithm for using terms, such as ‘gender’ and ‘climate change’, that have been deemed not to conform with the priorities of the administration of US President Donald Trump.

These new layers of review have delayed delivery of funds to labs and research institutions – and have even resulted in the outright rejection of some applications that had been approved by outside and agency scientists. Before 2025, it was unheard of for grants that had received such approvals to be rejected, says one of six NIH officials who spoke to *Nature* on condition of anonymity. The extra scrutiny ramped up in early 2026 and is conducted by NIH leaders and officials at the NIH’s parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

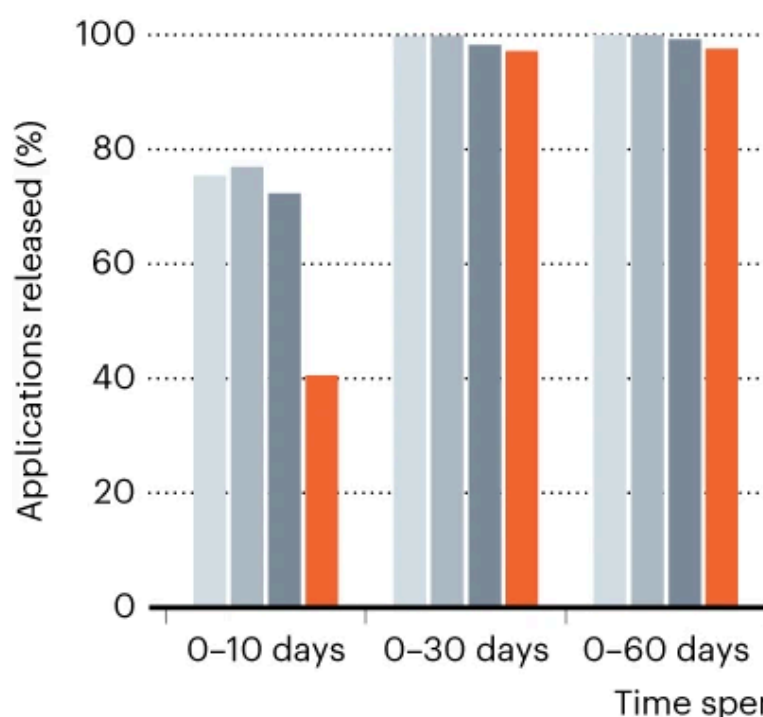
The extra scrutiny has particularly affected researchers waiting for previously approved projects to be renewed. Most applications clear the supplemental review in two weeks, but 10% of the grant-renewal applications that have entered this phase in the 2026 fiscal year have become stuck for more than seven weeks, and some have been held up indefinitely, according to data and internal e-mails that *Nature* has obtained (see 'Holding pattern').

HOLDING PATTERN

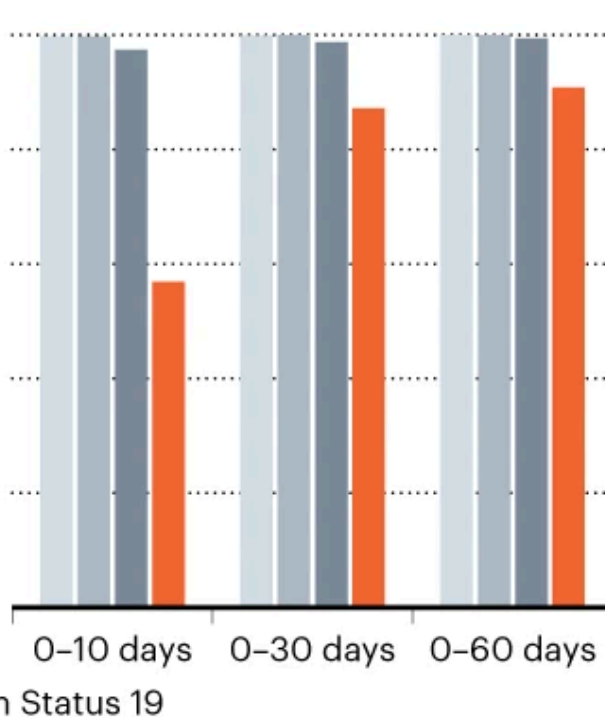
After approval from agency scientists, applications for US National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants move into 'Status 19', the internal designation for an award that has been fully prepared but not yet funded. Over the past year, officials at the NIH and its parent agency have begun additional scrutiny at this stage. Many applications that enter Status 19 are approved after a short delay. But a small fraction — especially applications for 'non-competing renewals' — are still being held back after two months.

2023 2024 2025 2026

Applications for new grants and competing renewals



Non-competing applications



Competing renewals undergo peer review alongside applications for new projects. Non-competing applications concern continuations of existing grants that have already been peer reviewed. Data are shown from the start of the fiscal year (1 October the previous calendar year) to early June.

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Source: US National Institutes of Health data obtained by an agency programme officer.

Similar reviews could be coming to other federal agencies. On 29 May, the White House proposed [rules that would give political appointees unheard-of control over scientific grant-making](#).

“We’re the test case,” says an NIH programme officer. “The new rules would essentially codify the administration’s ability to restrict funding on anything because they don’t like the topics or the words” used in the applications.

The Trump administration has criticized the federal grant-making process as opaque and unaccountable. Grants have been used “to promote a ‘woke’ policy agenda that did not reflect the values of the vast majority of the American public”, [says the 29 May proposal to overhaul grant-making](#).

In response to *Nature*'s queries about the grant-screening process, an NIH spokesperson said that “there are no ‘banned word’ lists at NIH, and funding decisions are not based on specific words or phrases.” Internal documents suggest that the agency does not ban these words, but projects that use them are much more likely to be scrutinized by programme officers who use the tool and by NIH and HHS officials reviewing the project.

Automated check

Weeks after Trump took office in January 2025, [his administration began terminating thousands of grants on disfavoured topics](#), such as diversity, equity and inclusion, climate change, misinformation, vaccine hesitancy and what it called ‘gender ideology’. Billionaire Elon Musk’s [Department of Government Efficiency \(DOGE\) directed these terminations](#), *Nature* previously reported.

As DOGE’s influence in government waned, NIH leaders formalized a screening process by creating an algorithm that checks applications for a list of disfavoured terms (see Supplementary information). As of February, the list included 235 terms, which serve as an “indicator that the grant likely needs, at a minimum, a revision to align its terminology with NIH priorities”, according to one internal document.

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The tool checks every application's title, abstract and other summary sections for terms including 'racism', 'fossil fuel', 'queer' and 'sexual minority' (referring to all forms of the phrase 'sexual minority').

This algorithm is applied after applications have passed two rounds of peer review, and after programme officials and the relevant institute director have deemed them worthy of funding and in alignment with institute priorities (see 'How an NIH grant is processed').

If the application contains one of the 235 disfavoured terms, it is classified as "not clean". Programme officers are then instructed to renegotiate the language or scope of the proposed project with the applicant, or to scrap it altogether. Officers must also write a 'decision memo' that describes the actions taken.

Grant limbo

After this step, applications enter a phase called Status 19. Historically, the NIH has used this status to give members of the US Congress advance notice of the projects being funded in their districts.

Now, this designation also gives NIH leaders and the "HHS counselor" an opportunity to review all applications, according to internal documents that *Nature* reviewed.

Feedback from both NIH leaders and HHS officials sometimes questions whether the applications should be funded, according to the documents. "Does [the institute] really want to fund this study? Seems likely to end up in a Congressional waste report," reads one comment, referring to analyses that highlight examples of allegedly improper federal spending.

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In such cases, the application is sent back to the handling NIH programme officer to remedy the issue, often requiring that they renegotiate the scope of the project with the applicant before resubmitting the grant for subsequent rounds of Status 19 review. Sometimes, e-mails reprimand the people who processed the applications: “There were a lot of problematic [National Institute on Aging] grants in the queue this week”, says one e-mail from NIH leaders in March. “Many of them had significant problems that should have been caught by your staff.”

Applications are often sent back because they include disfavoured topics or have [foreign collaborators](#) on projects that do not show a “clear benefit” to the United States. Applications are also bounced back to programme officers for alleged “lobbying activities”, a reference to projects that aim to inform policy; or for containing “vague and non-specific language”, such as the phrase ‘social determinants of health’, which is deemed not to include “measurable concepts”, according to e-mails that *Nature* obtained.

In rare cases, these extra reviews can prevent applications from being funded. *Nature* learnt of two such applications – they concerned research that was on politically sensitive topics but was not, according to NIH staff, in opposition to [the NIH’s priorities list](#), which was published in August 2025. “Just because the topic is something that makes some people uncomfortable doesn’t mean we shouldn’t research it,” says one NIH programme officer, who adds that the studies were deemed scientifically rigorous by multiple panels of scientists before they were shut down.

“It’s demoralizing the number of hours we spend working up a grant that they might kill at the last possible moment”, the officer says. “It’s a tremendous waste of taxpayer dollars.”

Heavier workload

Running the text-analysis tool, renegotiating applications and fielding comments from NIH and HHS leaders has tripled the workload of NIH staff members, they say. The extra steps also delay delivery of money to researchers, sometimes by months.

One NIH official analysed non-competing grant-renewal applications (those that have been peer reviewed in the past and are soliciting their next year of funding) that entered Status 19 between the start of the 2026 fiscal year on 1 October 2025 and early June 2026. They found that only 57% were approved within ten days. By comparison, in the same period over the previous three years, more than 95% of non-competing applications were approved within ten days.

Elizabeth Ginexi, who was an NIH programme officer for 22 years before leaving the agency in 2025, says that renewals might be especially scrutinized because they were originally “approved years ago under different criteria” and “are now being re-evaluated against current political requirements”.

These delays add to others caused by a [staffing shortage](#), [a record-breaking 43-day government shutdown in 2025](#) and a roughly [40-day delay in the White House's release of the 2026 NIH budget](#) after it was signed into law. As a result, the NIH has allocated about 17% less money so far in 2026 than it did, on average, in the same period in 2021–24.

“NIH leadership is telling staff not to create friction or cause obstruction to get grants out the door, when the reality is, it's the administration creating the barriers,” one programme officer says.

How an NIH grant application is processed

It can take more than a year for an application for a US National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant to work its way through the system. Numbers in brackets show roughly how long each step takes

Step 1: Submission and referral. After submission, an application is assigned to a specific NIH institute and a study section (a panel that provides peer review).

Step 2: Study-section peer review (6 months). The panel, made up of independent scientists from all over the United States, reviews the application, scores it and sends feedback to the applicant.

Step 3: Advisory-council review (3 months). Each institute's advisory council, composed of outside scientists, reviews the application to ensure that it broadly aligns with the institute's mission. The council's recommendation is sent to institute staff.

Step 4: Institute staff review and sign-off (4–6 weeks). Staff at the institute's branch and division levels develop a funding plan for the proposal. If the branch and division directors sign off on the application, it is reviewed by the institute director. The applicant is notified that their grant is being considered for funding.

Step 5: Programme and grants-management-specialist review (4–6 weeks). Programme staff members check that the application follows NIH's scientific requirements in areas such as the treatment of human study participants. At the same time, grants-management specialists review the proposed budget details, ensure that prospective grant recipients comply with the NIH's financial policies and prepare the formal notice of award. These steps are delayed if the US Congress and president have not approved an annual spending bill.

As of this year, an application in this phase is also screened for disfavoured terms and concepts. If these are detected, programme officers must draft a "justification memo" to defend the award and work with the applicant to revise the application.

Step 6: "Status 19" administrative hold (typically 1–4 weeks but can be considerably longer). The application is put on hold – a step originally intended to allow time for members of congressional staff to get a preview of grants funded in their districts.

As of this year, every grant at this stage is now reviewed by top NIH officials and then by leading officials at the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the NIH. If these officials object to anything in the application, it is sent back to step 5.

Step 7: Award issued. The applicant is notified, and their institution gains access to the funds.

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UPDATES & CORRECTIONS

Clarification 27 June 2026: The role of an NIH employee has been clarified in this version of the article.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. [Disfavoured words](#)

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Term	Category
changing climate	Climate Change
climate change	Climate Change
climate crisis	Climate Change
climate justice	Climate Change
environmental justice	Climate Change
fossil fuel	Climate Change
global warming	Climate Change
address diversity	DEI
advance diversity	DEI
advancement diversity	DEI
advances diversity	DEI
advancing diversity	DEI
apartheid	DEI
attendee diversity	DEI
bolster diversity	DEI
broaden diversity	DEI
broadening diversity	DEI
broadens diversity	DEI
campus diversity	DEI
center diversity	DEI
cohort diversity	DEI
commitment diversity	DEI
committed diversity	DEI
criminal justice	DEI
critical race theory	DEI
cultural diversity	DEI
cultural equity	DEI
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digital equity	DEI
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user diversity	DEI
values diversity	DEI
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gender equity	Gender

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gender sex	Gender
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LGBT	Gender
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phalloplasty	Gender
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queer	Gender
sex assigned	Gender
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SGM	Gender
transfeminine	Gender
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transphob	Gender
transsexual	Gender
vaginoplasty	Gender
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malinform	Misinformation
misinform	Misinformation
accept vaccin	Vaccine Heistancy
acceptance vaccin	Vaccine Heistancy
refusal vaccin	Vaccine Heistancy
refuse vaccin	Vaccine Heistancy
vaccination acceptance	Vaccine Heistancy
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vaccination refusal	Vaccine Heistancy
vaccine acceptance	Vaccine Heistancy
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