

White House ordered NIH to cancel coronavirus research funding, Fauci says



Enlarge / Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, wears a Washington Nationals protective mask after a House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing in Washington DC on Tuesday, June 23, 2020.

reader comments

154 with 98 posters participating

Share this story

Covid-19 Coverage

[View more stories](#)

The National Institutes of Health abruptly cut off funding to a long-standing, well-regarded research project on bat coronaviruses only after the White House specifically told it to do so, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Fauci made the revelation Tuesday at a Congressional hearing on the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is caused by a coronavirus that is genetically linked to those found in bats. Rep. Marc Veasey (D-Texas) asked Fauci why the NIH abruptly canceled funding for the project, which specifically worked to understand the risk of bat coronaviruses jumping to humans and causing devastating disease.

Fauci responded to Veasey saying: "It was cancelled because the NIH was told to cancel it."

"And why were they told to cancel it?" Veasey pressed.

"I don't know the reason, but we were told to cancel it," Fauci said.

After the hearing, Fauci clarified to Politico that it was the White House that told the NIH to cancel the funding. An unnamed White House official told Politico that the White House did encourage the funding cut, but ultimately it was the Department of Health and Human Services—of which the NIH is a part—that made the final decision. An HHS spokesperson said only that the funding was cut because "the grantee was not in compliance with NIH's grant policy."

In an emailed statement to Ars Wednesday, the NIH did not respond to questions about the cancellation, saying only that "NIH does not discuss internal deliberations on grant

terminations.”

Politics and conspiracies

The involvement of the White House is a new wrinkle in a story that has appalled and angered scientists. Since the grant was nixed in late April, scientists had speculated that politics and a conspiracy theory played a role in canceling funding for the research, which was in good scientific standing and seen as critical work. The grant, titled “Understanding the risk of bat coronavirus emergence,” was originally funded by the NIH in 2014 and renewed for another five years in 2019 after receiving an outstanding peer-review score.

The research is run by EcoHealth Alliance Inc., a nonprofit based in New York, but it collaborates with a virologist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) in China, who works with bat coronaviruses. The WIV became the center of a conspiracy theory that suggested that the pandemic coronavirus originated in or escaped from a lab at the institute.

On April 17, a reporter brought up that conspiracy theory and EcoHealth’s grant to President Trump during a press conference. The reporter asked “Why would the US give a grant like that to China?” Trump responded that “We will end that grant very quickly.”

In an email to EcoHealth on April 19—two days later—Dr. Michael Lauer, NIH deputy director for Extramural Research, reportedly wrote:

The scientific community believes that the coronavirus causing COVID-19 jumped from bats to humans likely in Wuhan where the COVID-19 pandemic began. There are now allegations that the current crisis was precipitated by the release from Wuhan Institute of Virology of the coronavirus responsible for COVID-19. Given these concerns, we are pursuing suspension of Wuhan Institute of Virology from participation

in federal programs.

The funding was terminated on April 24. In a termination letter to EcoHealth, the NIH wrote that “At this time, NIH does not believe that the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities.”

Shoddy truth

Following Dr. Fauci’s revelations Tuesday, EcoHealth President Peter Daszak tweeted that it was an “obvious case of political interference.”

“Eventually, we’ll all know the shoddy truth of how a conspiracy theory pushed by this administration led @NIHDirector to block the only US research group still working in China to analyze COVID origins,” he wrote. “Thanks to this China can now do the research, we can’t!”

Scientists, meanwhile, have roundly refuted claims that the WIV was the source of the new coronavirus, noting that natural spillover from animals is the most likely source.

In an April 18 comment to ScienceInsider, the WIV virologist working with EcoHealth— Shi Zhengli—also disputed the link, saying that “the closest progenitor of COVID-19 virus is still mysterious and it’s definitely not from my lab or any other labs... It’s a shame to make the science so complicated.”

Scientists also continue to express dismay at the apparent political interference. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) released a statement Wednesday saying that such orders to cancel funding “will undermine the integrity of science funding and public trust. We urge Congress to use its oversight authority to ensure that the integrity of government science agencies is not compromised.”

<https://arstechnica.com/?p=1687124>