

Ella Engel

23 February 2024

## Environmental Research Funding Cuts

On a clear sunny day at the University of California Santa Barbara's ecological restoration hub the [North Campus Open Space](#), Greenhouse and Nursery Manager Wayne Chapman and his team are getting their hands dirty planting the critically endangered Marsh Sandwort. Their goal: to get this native plant back on its feet before it's too late. They hope to eventually establish enough new growth to outplant into San Luis Obispo County and create new occurrences of the plant outside of their project. "It's one of the rarest plants in the world," Chapman says, but he notes that all the plants he works to protect are on the brink of extinction.

Besides the Marsh Sandwort, Chapman is also working to restore the Ventura Marsh Milkvetch, a marshy dune plant, as well as the Saltmarsh Birds Beak, a salt marsh plant. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has financially supported Chapman's efforts to expand the range of these endangered plants, and he has successfully brought the Saltmarsh Birds Beak, from a quickly withering Carpinteria Salt Marsh to the local Devereux Slough.

Chapman and his team are currently the only people ensuring these plants do not go extinct, working to grow, monitor, and maintain these plants in their greenhouse at UCSB's North Campus Open Space.

On Jan. 20, the fate of these already ecologically vulnerable plants was further threatened by the Trump Administration's funding cuts. Chapman has received \$35,000 in funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the past three years, which has financially supported the only nursery in the world growing his beloved Marsh Sandwort. That money has suddenly run dry. "They basically told me, that's gone and don't plan on getting any more funding," Chapman said regarding his once-flowing US Fish and Wildlife budget.

Without this funding, Chapman is unsure how this project will continue. "We rely on these Fish and Wildlife bits to do a lot with very little money," he said.

He said he's frustrated that people think that current budget cuts are simply trimming away excess money. "There's no fraud and abuse here," he said. "It's just salt-of-the-earth people working for really low salaries, doing frontline endangered species work." Nobody is overpaid for the important work they do. These projects only have enough funding to exist, Chapman explained.

The story of Wayne Chapman is not unique. Executive orders by the Trump administration have already cut [millions of dollars in funding](#) at universities across the country, leaving professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students worrying about the fate of their studies. While research across many disciplines has been affected, the Trump administration has specifically targeted research grants involving the [environment and climate](#). This has

become so clear, that some projects have been able to [regain funding after being retitled](#) to exclude the terms “climate” or “climate change.”

UCSB Geography Professor Charles Jones worries his proposed research may be at risk due to its content. He recently submitted two proposals for federal funding, one for a study on forecasting fire weather conditions, and the other for studying climate change impacts on the wine industry in California, Oregon, and Seattle. Jones said he fears that these proposals will likely be denied, “because they may have an aspect related to climate change.”

Jones believes it’s now critical to keep projects like his research in action, especially in light of climate events such as the recent Los Angeles wildfires. “If this research is not going to be funded, it will have significant impacts,” Jones said. “Wildfires have been impacting the western United States for a while now. We had all these disasters a couple of weeks ago.”

Environmental projects like Jones’ are a prime target of the administration. But wider-ranging cuts to universities under the new legislation have also already made a dent in the environmental science field.

An [executive order](#) from President Trump on Jan. 20 which ceased USAID funding, fully halted UCSB Environmental Studies Professor Mark Buntaine’s long-term research project. Buntaine has been conducting a trial in Malawi, studying the effects of paying farmers to maintain soil health. His study had just reached its final year and was on track to complete final data collection and send arranged payments out to farmers in the next two months. Instead, it was met with the same deadly fate as almost all USAID-funded research. “At this point, it’s unclear how we will finish this project we’ve been pursuing for the last 4-5 years,” Buntaine said.

Another of Buntaine’s projects also just wrapped up its final data collection, after working with 70 Indigenous communities in Peru to assess their land tenure and deforestation prevention investments. Shortly after the data for that project was compiled, it too came to a screeching halt by the same USAID stop work order.

Buntaine explained that these projects were not targeted as environmental projects, but were instead affected by a general USAID funding block, a “stop work” order to all USAID-funded projects, except for a few that were deemed essential. “If your program wasn’t providing on-the-ground food assistance tomorrow, it was a blanket stop work order,” Buntaine said.

University faculty and students across the country continue to worry about how the rest of these funding cuts will play out, whether temporary freezes on research funding blocks will become permanent, or reversed. “This is all very new and we are trying to muddle through and figure it out,” Buntaine said of the executive orders.

Researchers like Wayne Chapman say they will look to local and state funding to replace the

federal funding they once relied on. His team is going to apply for other sources of funding to try and carry out their projects, and continue fighting for the lives of the endangered species they work to protect. “We aren’t planning on getting anything federal at all,” he said.