

The U.S. Government Is Starving Its Own Scientists of Knowledge

The National Agricultural Library canceled many journal subscriptions to save costs, leaving USDA staff without access.

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Madison Sankovitz is a postdoctoral researcher at the Boulder Bee Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder who is currently funded by the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Imagine trying to solve a complex problem without access to the instruction manual — or worse, being told the manual was too expensive to keep on hand. That's exactly what the federal government is doing to the scientists who protect our food systems, environments, and public health.

I'm an entomologist funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to research pollinator health and invasive species. My work helps farmers, land managers, and communities respond to urgent threats like [pollinator decline](#). But in recent months, scientists like me have found themselves blocked from accessing the very tools we need to do that work — scientific journals.

Earlier this year, the USDA's National Agricultural Library, or NAL, [canceled](#) access to a wide range of journals published by Oxford University Press, the National Academy of Sciences, and others — about one-fifth of the library's original journals, according to a list obtained by Science. These aren't academic luxuries. They're essential sources of up-to-date research on bee diseases, soil management, pest control, and regenerative agriculture — information that directly shapes our work in the lab and in the field. The NAL offers one of the world's largest collections focused on agriculture and related sciences and serves other federal agencies and the general public, as well as USDA scientists. The NAL also loans papers to scientists whose host institutions don't have subscriptions.

The implications are wide-reaching. Scientific journals are not easy to access as they are often behind paywalls; scientists usually read them through an institutional account. For example, the average price for a chemistry journal subscription in 2025 is [\\$8,572](#). Without access to current literature, federally funded researchers risk duplicating work, missing proven solutions, and making decisions based on outdated or incomplete information. That's not just inefficient — it's dangerous. And it's a waste of taxpayer dollars.

As a field-based scientist, I rely on peer-reviewed publications to understand shifting trends and threats in real time. When I evaluate the spread of an invasive mite or advise on pollinator conservation, I depend on the latest findings to inform my decisions. Without them, I'm navigating without critical information and depending on articles that are freely available online, which are less common because journals charge scientists a hefty fee — often on the order of [thousands of dollars](#) — to make their work open-access.

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Some might argue that access to a few high-impact journals is sufficient. But science doesn't work that way — especially in agriculture. Pollinator health alone is influenced by factors such as soil chemistry, pesticide interactions, climate variability, and disease ecology. The best research often appears in specialized [journals](#) published by scientific societies — the same journals the NAL just cut off.

It's worth noting that many of the articles now locked behind paywalls were [funded](#) by the federal government in the first place. That means taxpayers are effectively paying twice: once to produce the science, and again for lost efficiency when government researchers can't access it.

The decision to cancel these subscriptions was framed as a cost-saving measure. But it's a false economy. The cost of restoring access to journals like those from Oxford or the National Academy of Sciences is likely a drop in the bucket compared to the [cost](#) of a single failed crop season due to poor pest management or delayed response to pest invasion.

Public research should be supported by public infrastructure. That includes access to knowledge. When we starve our scientists of the information they need, we're not just hurting research — we're undermining our food security, our environmental resilience, and our ability to respond to emerging threats.

There are solutions. Congress can act to restore funding for the NAL's journal subscriptions. Agencies can also renegotiate agreements with [publishers](#) or invest in broad-based [open-access strategies](#). But whatever the path forward, the outcome should be clear: Researchers funded to serve the public should not be locked out of the knowledge required to do that job.

In a time of mounting agricultural and ecological challenges, we need to empower scientists, not sabotage them.

You can't fix what you can't see. And right now, scientists like me are being asked to solve some of our country's most urgent problems — while being kept in the dark.

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