

# Proposed \$3 billion in cuts to EPA and NOAA budgets worry Romberg scientists

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Scientists at the Romberg Tiburon Center for Environmental Studies are anxious over reports the Trump administration wants to slash \$3 billion in federal funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, including millions of dollars dedicated to environmental research and clean-water monitoring in San Francisco Bay.

If enacted, the proposed cuts could interfere with federally funded educational programs at Romberg, impact research opportunities for the center's students and might even cost some young scientists their jobs, said Karina Nielsen, the executive director at the Romberg center, San Francisco State University's marine biology lab.

"It is fair to say we are alarmed by the news," Nielsen said.

Nielsen said that \$2 million, or 35 percent, of Romberg's budget comes from federal funding. That money helps pay for studies on ocean acidification monitoring, STEM teacher training programs and eelgrass research on Richardson Bay. Although the center's funding is not in immediate peril, some of its partner programs, such as the National Estuarine Research Reserve based on the center's Tiburon campus, could be eliminated in this round of budget cuts.

"All these great partnerships and the wonderful environmental planning and research (Romberg) and (San Francisco State) help leverage on behalf of San Francisco Bay would not be possible without federal science funding," Nielsen said.

She said budget cuts would mean reduced opportunities for research training for San Francisco State students and reduced teacher development programs for local educators.

"And, of course, if the very worst were to happen, some of our program staff, most who reside and have families in Marin County, could be out of work," Nielsen said.

The Trump administration, seeking a 10 percent increase in defense spending, is looking to balance the federal budget by cutting budgets at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency, two sources of funding for research into the effects of climate change.

Under the White House proposal, the EPA's budget would be cut by \$2 billion, from \$8.2 billion to \$6.2 billion, mostly

in funding dedicated to water-pollution programs in the Great Lakes region and throughout the nation, as well as air-quality and compliance programs, according to a copy of the plan obtained and released by the National Association of Clean Air Agencies.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the proposed budget cuts would eliminate a \$4.8 million grant called the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Improvement Fund that is offered competitively to local governments and nongovernmental organizations to restore Bay Area wetlands and watersheds and reduce pollution runoff.

So far the program, created in 2008 by U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., has invested \$44 million and leveraged \$153 million for 61 local projects with more than 70 partners in the Bay Area, including science education programs, water quality testing and wetland restoration, according to the agency's website.

While the amount lost through the elimination of the grant is relatively small — Bay Area voters in June 2016 approved Measure AA, a parcel tax that will raise half a billion dollars over 20 years to restore wetlands around San Francisco Bay — it would be felt, Nielsen said.

"This would indeed be a huge loss for San Francisco Bay," Nielsen said.

Of more immediate concern are proposed cuts to the budget of the National Ocean and Atmospheric Agency, or NOAA.

According to a memo leaked to the Washington Post from the Office of Management and Budget, the administration is proposing a 17 percent cut to NOAA's \$5.6 billion budget, including sharp reductions in spending on education, grants and research. The cuts would include programs supporting coastal management and coastal resilience, which explore how coastal communities can cope with rising sea levels, a major focus of research on San Francisco Bay.

One of the programs on the chopping block is the National Estuarine Research Reserves, a string of 233 research and education programs around the country focusing on estuary preservation. The San Francisco branch operates out of the Romberg center, with a staff of nine, researching wetland ecology and offering teacher training programs and advice to coastal wetland managers. The program's staff at Romberg has recently been studying the native Olympia oyster population in Richardson Bay and China Camp, learning

more about how climate change is affecting the bivalves.

While the program does receive support from San Francisco State University, staff salaries, with the exception of the executive director, are paid for with NOAA funding, leading to worries the scientists could be laid off.

Michael Vasey, the executive director of the National Estuarine Research Reserves, said he did not believe the program would be axed altogether, despite what the memo said.

"There's a lot of bipartisan support in Congress for this program," he said in a phone interview.

However, Vasey said the proposed cuts would probably interfere with his budget, which might mean sharing staff with other organizations like Marin County Parks and San Francisco State.

Vasey said he was more concerned about the proposed elimination of the EPA's S.F. Bay Water Quality Improvement Fund, from which he hoped to secure a grant this year to help set up a regional water-quality monitoring program in San Rafael's McInnis Park marsh.

U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, said the Trump administration was misguided in its attempt to defund the Environmental Protection Agency.

"When you have a regulatory agency, that doesn't mean it has to be an adversarial relationship. They can act as a referee and help sort out problems," Huffman said. He also said many in the fisheries industry, for example, depend on NOAA scientific data on weather and oceans currents to do their work.

"People should be worried," Huffman said. "There are big cuts coming down, and they're going to have a ripple effect the Republicans aren't even aware of yet."

However, Nielsen said she remained hopeful the proposed cuts would be re-evaluated, especially if the public stands up for environmental research.

"We temper our concern with the knowledge that President (Donald) Trump has not released his budget yet and that the federal budget process has a long way to go still," she wrote in a recent email. "These numbers and proposals can still change. We know that the people of the Bay Area and Marin County, and our federal representatives, care deeply about the environmental health of (San Francisco) Bay and STEM education and research in our public schools and universities."