

Israel's war budget leaves top scientists in limbo

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Saving chocolate: Israel scientist Ellen Graber.

Israeli scientist Ellen Graber has spent years researching ways to save chocolate crops from climate change. But with the government slashing spending to fund the war in Gaza, her project is one of hundreds now

hanging in the balance.

Graber's research had already been hit by the war—she had to abandon her cacao plants when the area where they were grown was evacuated after the October 7 Hamas attack.

They survived weeks of drought-like conditions in a greenhouse.

But the state-funded Volcani Institute where she works is now facing huge budget cuts.

The institute specializes in arid and desert environments, increasingly vital areas of study for a planet wracked by extreme weather caused by climate change.

Now the government's war budget means hundreds of the institute's projects are under threat.

'Functionally stagnant'

Israeli politicians approved sweeping cuts to ministry budgets earlier this month to pay for an 82 percent rise in defense spending and some key demands of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition allies.

They included controversial measures to boost financing of ultra-Orthodox education programs and Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The ministry of agriculture was one of the hardest hit, facing a 12 percent cut.

The Volcani Institute is set to lose a fifth of its state money, which it says will effectively bring its research to a halt.



Cocoa pods at Israel's Volcani Institute.

The warning comes days after Israel's state auditor criticized the government's "functionally stagnant" handling of the climate crisis.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid called the budget "the most sectarian, disconnected and reckless" in the country's history.

And economist Itai Ater, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute think tank, said the budget "will certainly harm... education, health, welfare and infrastructure".

'Whole thing will dry up'

Volcani's acting director Shmuel Assouline warned lawmakers its revised budget would only cover basic running costs.

He said halting its research could mean a loss of around 100 million shekels (\$27 million) in its partnerships with other institutions and corporate partners.

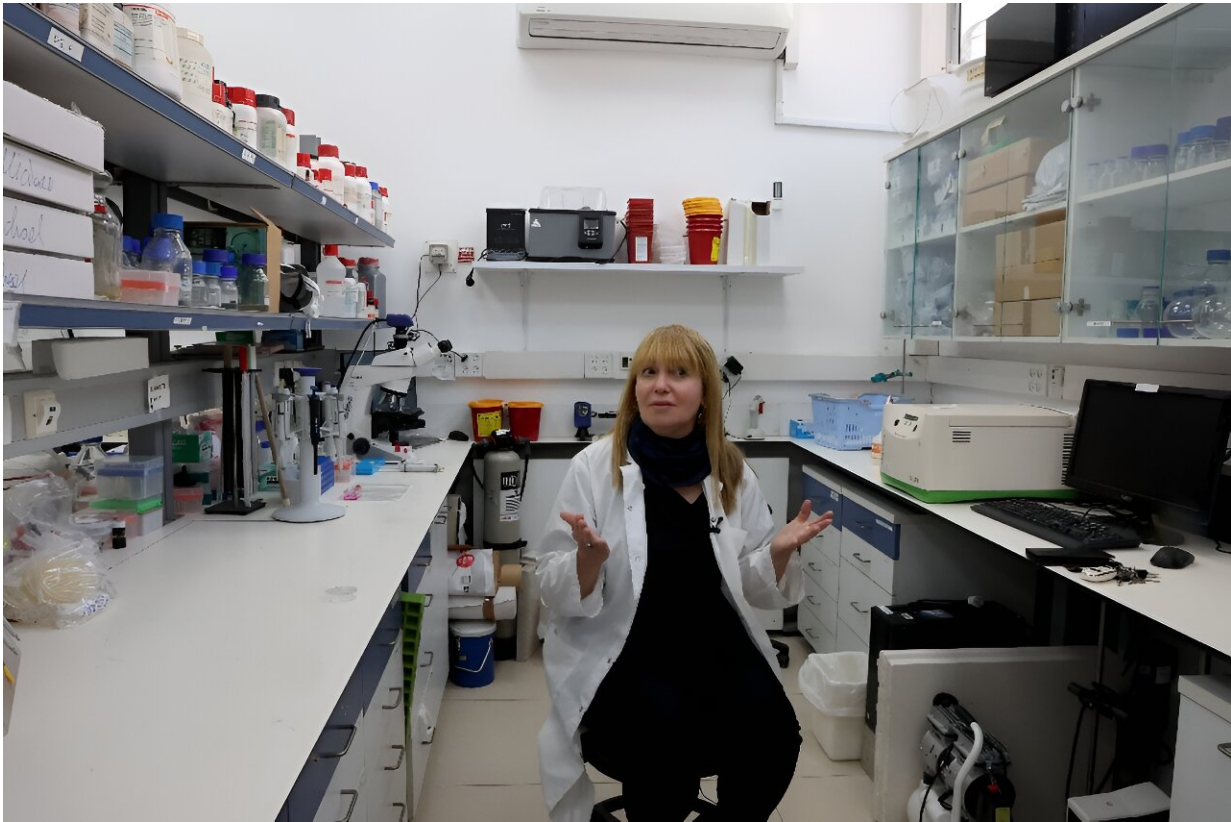
"If we lose our good name, private companies won't come to invest," he added.

Graber, a soil scientist, started growing tropical cacao plants four years ago to devise ways "to increase yields, to increase quality, to deal with pests and pathogens and diseases" plaguing the cacao industry globally.

"I can't buy important chemicals, the equipment that I need, the materials I need to work and to continue this study," Graber said.

"Within one year, this whole thing will dry up."

Volcani's sprawling campus in central Israel has the atmosphere of a kibbutz crossed with a top-secret research facility.



Deeply worried: Hinanit Koltai.

Cows low in barns meters from laboratories where researchers are trying to isolate fungus-killing bacterial strains they hope will replace chemical pesticides.

Its researchers are at the forefront of climate change solutions for agriculture.

They collaborate with universities, governments and private companies around the globe on subjects as diverse as meteorology and water-use to gene-editing and environmental microbiology.

Eddie Cytryn, director of Volcani's Institute of Soil, Water and Environmental Sciences, said the cuts would have "tremendous impacts" on [field research](#) and international collaboration—and the grants that fund them.

Cell growth research stunted

Scientists Hinanit Koltai and Guy Mechrez head a team studying a novel method to accelerate and control cell growth in cows.

Their research, carried out in partnership with an Israeli firm called Nanomeat, aims to overcome a major hurdle for the lab-grown meat industry.

But Koltai echoed Graber and Assouline in saying her team was no longer able to buy materials for their research and warning they could lose their corporate partners.

"Nanomeat will go to somebody else no doubt," she said.

Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter told Kan [public radio](#) that he had "a serious disagreement with the [finance ministry](#)" over funds for the Volcani Institute.

He said Netanyahu "promised to intervene" but for the time being the scientists are left in limbo.

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