

Shutdown heads south; Antarctic stations shuttered (Update)

8 October 2013, by Seth Borenstein

The U.S. federal government shutdown is reaching all the way down to the South Pole. requests for comment.

The National Science Foundation announced Tuesday that it is putting its three Antarctic scientific stations in deep freeze just as scientists are starting to arrive for the start of a new research season.

The NSF runs three stations in Antarctica spending just under \$400 million a year there. It often takes weeks for some 1200 researchers who spend Antarctic spring and summer there to get to the southern continent by boat or plane.

"This is absurd, just absurd," said Alan Leshner, chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the nation's largest science organization. "It's a very big logistical enterprise and this could jeopardize the entire research season for hundreds of important projects."

Researchers study astronomy, particle physics, climate change, and biology in the pristine continent, usually starting in October when the weather warms in the southern spring. The largest station is McMurdo but there are also stations at the South Pole and the Antarctic peninsula.

In a terse statement on its website, the NSF announced that "all field and research activities not essential to human safety and preservation of property will be suspended" because the agency runs out of money to operate the stations as of Oct. 14. The agency told its logistics contractor, Lockheed Martin Corp., to move to "caretaker status" in which a skeletal crew will remain to protect property and safety.

If funding resumes, officials will try to resume some research. However, some studies cannot be restarted, the NSF said. NSF and Lockheed Martin officials did not respond to phone calls and email

A ship had been scheduled to arrive Wednesday with researchers, including those working on a long-term study that has tracked penguins and other creatures since 1990, said Brown University doctoral student Catherine Luria who was working with colleagues now there. That work, coordinated by Hugh Ducklow of Columbia University, relied on statistics and trend that need to be unbroken.

"If we miss a year, we'll never get it back again," said Ducklow, who has tracked a 95 percent drop in Adelie penguin population over the years. "It's pretty devastating for our project."

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute researcher Sarah Das was in Antarctica the last time the federal government shutdown in 1995 and 1996 and said it didn't stop work then. She said the announcement "saddens and angers me."

Luria, who has spent nine months in Antarctica, said she can't imagine what it will be like for the handful of staff who have to remain: "It sounds truly lonely to me."

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