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United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20510–6125
WEBSITE: https://commerce.senate.gov

Senator Bill Cassidy
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

November 16, 2026

Dear Chairman Cassidy,

We write to urge you to hold a full Committee public hearing on the nomination of James O'Neill to be Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) before moving his nomination forward. Given the scale of recent changes at NSF and the importance of the agency to American competitiveness, national security, and the scientific workforce, the Senate should have an opportunity to hear directly from the nominee about how he would lead NSF. The Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee has jurisdiction over authorizations for the NSF and a strong vested interest in its next leader.

NSF was created in 1950, in the aftermath of World War II, to promote the progress of science, advance the nation's health, prosperity, and welfare, and secure the national defense. For more than seven decades, NSF has supported the discovery science that leads to new industries, medical advances, critical technologies, and a stronger national defense. At this moment, the question before the Senate is not only who will manage NSF, but who can be trusted to restore and strengthen it.

Since January 2025, the Trump Administration has repeatedly frozen and terminated research grants, reduced the NSF workforce by more than 30 percent, and removed every member of the National Science Board. The Administration has also proposed budget cuts, including a $4 billion cut for FY 2027 that would represent a 55% reduction from the prior year and would further weaken the agency. Although Congress rejected these cuts in FY 2026 by appropriating more than $8.75 billion for NSF, the Administration has withheld an unprecedented $1.4 billion. Finally, on April 24, 2026, the Administration removed every member of the National Science Board without explanation. With the Board vacant, the Director will be without the independent scientific expertise, continuity, and oversight Congress intended the Board to provide. Together, these actions have created uncertainty across the research community and raised serious

questions about the future of the agency responsible for supporting the basic research that underpins American innovation, economic competitiveness, public health, and national security.

Furthermore, the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) May 29, 2026 proposed government-wide grant rule would threaten NSF's merit-review system. The proposed rule would require senior appointees to review discretionary awards before they are issued and would expand agencies' authority to terminate any active awards. If finalized, the rule would move NSF funding decisions away from the independent peer-review process that has guided the agency for decades and toward greater control by political leadership. While we oppose OMB's change to the rule, it makes it even more essential for the Senate to hear how Mr. O'Neill would protect scientific merit and NSF's core mission.

At this moment, NSF needs credible, trusted, and capable leadership. A nominee preparing to lead this agency should explain how he intends to implement the important authorities Congress has vested in the NSF before the Senate votes, not after. The Committee and the public should hear directly from Mr. O'Neill about how he would lead NSF, restore confidence in the agency, rebuild the NSF workforce, and ensure that the United States remains the global leader in science and technology.

With the future of American research, science, and innovation at stake, the Senate should fully perform its constitutional role of advice and consent by hearing directly from Mr. O'Neill before acting on his nomination. Therefore, we respectfully ask that you notice a public hearing and bring Mr. O'Neill before the Committee before any vote on his nomination.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Science, Manufacturing, and Competitiveness, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation