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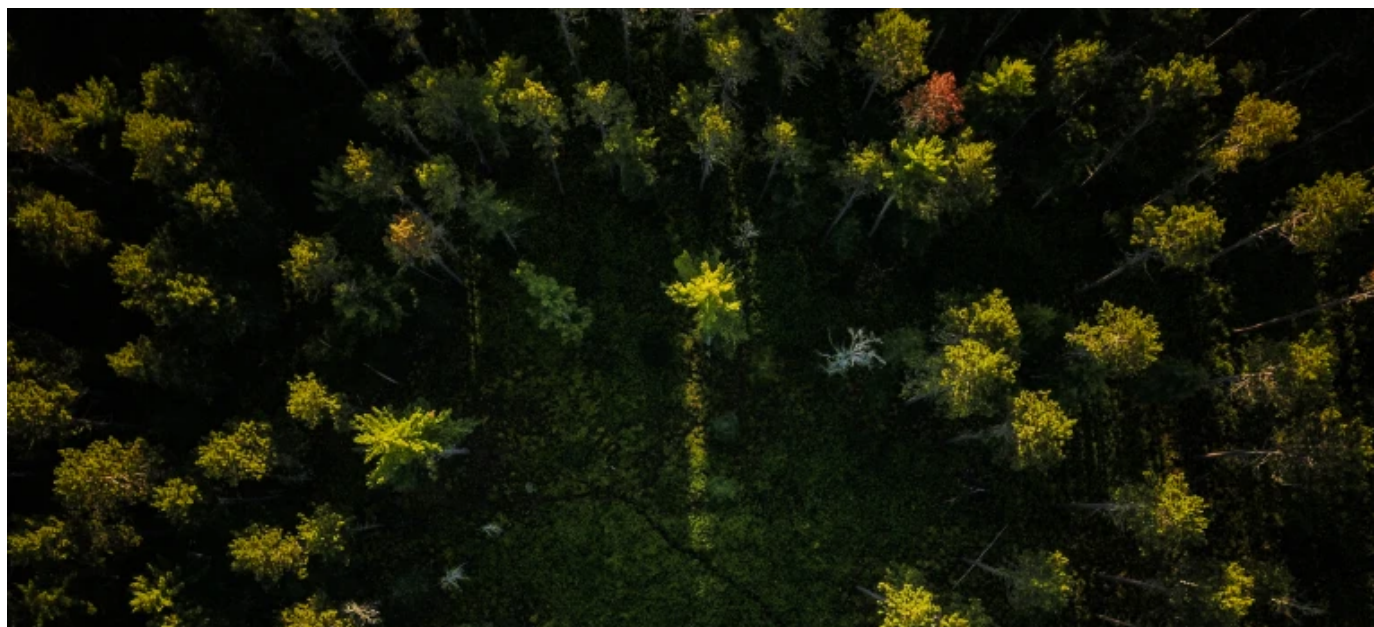
NEWS | 08 May 2026

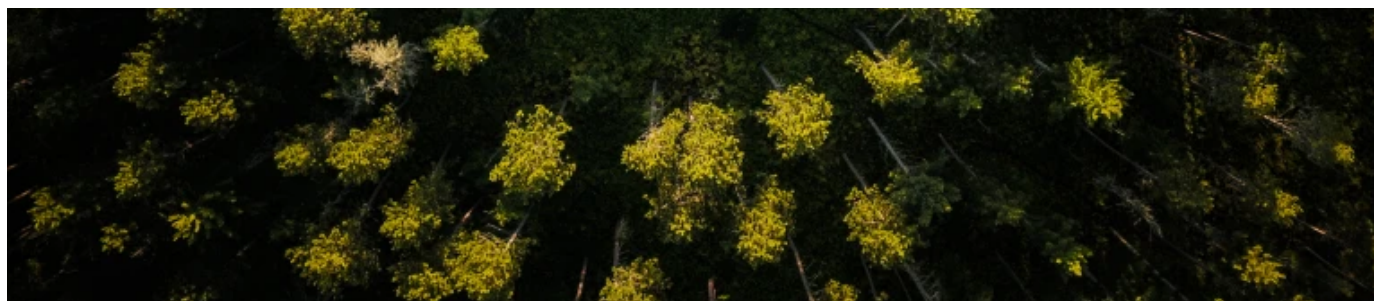
World's largest forest research agency faces severe cutback by Trump administration

The US Forest Service has proposed closing some three-quarters of its research sites in a move that has provoked widespread fear and uncertainty.

By [Edward Chen](#)

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The Cutfoot Experimental Forest in Minnesota is near a research facility that could be closed as part of the US Forest Service's reorganization. Credit: Salwan Georges/The Washington Post/Getty

“Overwhelmed.” “Saddened.” “Crushed.” “Demoralized.” That’s how some former and current scientists at the US Forest Service feel as the agency weighs closing dozens of its research sites. The list includes facilities that support research at [woodlands](#) designated as experimental forests, some of which have supported active, longitudinal research for more than a century.

These locations are “irreplaceable. You can’t say, ‘OK, I lost that one. I’m going to go start another 70-year study,’” says a recently retired forest-service scientist. (They requested anonymity to protect ongoing research collaborations with agency staff.)

As it stands, the forest service’s Research and Development (R&D) branch is the world’s largest forestry-research organization, with roughly 1,000 employees at 77 sites. Its scientific track record includes identifying the exact species of fungus that causes [white-nose syndrome in bats](#) and creating [a woodland-fire model](#) used in multiple countries.

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These scientists are setting a

If a large number of sites are closed, many research projects would be more difficult, if not impossible, according to nearly two dozen former forest-service scientists and six of their collaborators who spoke to *Nature*. These researchers also say that uncertainty over job reassignments could drive scientists to leave the

forest on fire – and studying it with drones

agency, and that the proposal is the latest blow to an organization that, over the past 18 months, has already lost hundreds of employees in the R&D branch and cut back its scientific work.

Forest-service officials justify the proposal by pointing to the agency's vast stock of neglected infrastructure and the low occupancy of some sites, and say that its science won't be affected. "The intent of the reorganization is to maintain the research," US Forest Service chief Tom Schultz told Congress in April.

But others worry that closures will have far-reaching consequences.

The reorganization plan "is very short-sighted", says Vicki Christiansen, who was forest-service chief during President Donald Trump's first term, which ended in 2021. "If administrations need to scale back, they need to scale back. But do it in a thoughtful way that sustains some of the core pieces of what generations before us have collected."

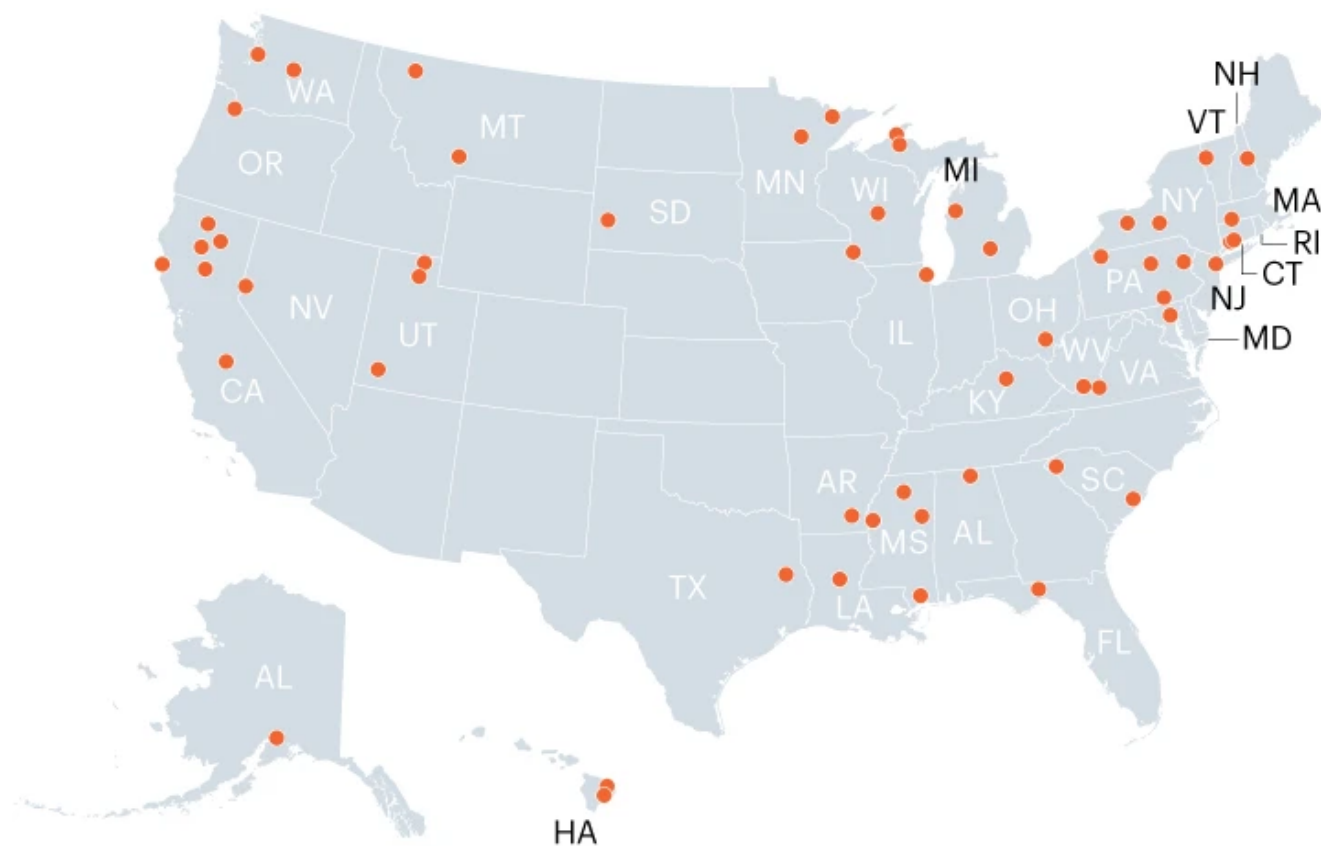
Research likely to 'dry up'

The Trump administration's 2026 budget proposed no funding at all for forest-service R&D, but Congress slightly increased its share from 2025 levels, to US\$309 million. Last month, the administration released a proposal for 2027 that again gave no funding for the R&D branch. Congress, which has the final say over federal spending, has not yet responded.

On 31 March, the forest service [announced it would close 57 of its 77 research sites](#), which range from a split-level house to sprawling complexes of laboratories and greenhouses (see 'Research sites under threat'). After [protests from members of Congress](#) and others, the agency reversed course and now says it is evaluating the future of the 57 sites. It says it will make decisions "over the coming year".

RESEARCH SITES UNDER THREAT

The US Forest Service is evaluating 57 research sites (orange dots) for possible closure. The sites range from single buildings to large complexes of laboratories and greenhouses.



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Source: US Forest Service

The agency maintains that closures would save money and increase efficiency.

“We have a \$3-billion deferred maintenance backlog,” Schultz told Congress in April, referring to the price tag for projects across the entire agency. He added that many sites have only a few employees. A forest-service fact sheet says that it’s a “myth” that “research activities will stop if some facilities close”. It also says that the agency will relocate R&D staff and programmes from closed research sites and that “closure of facilities on experimental forests will not affect the ability to conduct research at these locations.”

At least one former forest-service scientist is supportive. “Decreasing overhead is

generally thought to be a good thing,” says Sharon Friedman, a retired forest-service geneticist.

But many former workers are generally sceptical of the administration’s arguments, including its assertions about costs. “R&D deferred maintenance is a real drop in the bucket,” says Alexander Friend, who led the R&D branch as deputy chief for four years. The forest service did not immediately respond directly to Friend’s statement, but said, “These are proposed closures, nothing is final. We are taking a hard look at the cost of each facility, its utilization, and its deferred maintenance needs while supporting our people.”

Friend and others say that closing research sites will inevitably lead to a decline in science.

“Forest-service research is very place-based,” says Ann Bartuska, who led the R&D branch for seven years. “If you close the location, that research will likely dry up.”

‘Break and lose things’

The experimental forests are a prime example, say researchers. Facilities at or near these remote locations are crucial for tasks such as refrigerating animal specimens. Saying that closing facilities “isn’t going to impact research is really not true,” says Mariko Yamasaki, a wildlife biologist who worked at an experimental forest before retiring in 2023.

“Experimental forests and ranges are important assets to the Forest Service and the broader science community, and research on them will continue,” a spokesperson for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees the forest service, said in response.

Researchers worry, too, that archived plant, soil and water samples will be lost if

facilities are closed, along with filing cabinets full of written measurements, maps and field notes that have not yet been digitized. “You’re going to break and lose things,” says Christopher Swanston, who was associate deputy chief for R&D until he retired in 2025. “And that will affect all of the subsequent research.”

In response, a USDA spokesperson said, “Continuity and stewardship of collections are being considered.”

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An internal memo about the reorganization, sent to all R&D employees and obtained by *Nature*, promises positions for those “willing to accept reassignment”. But current and former R&D employees say that researchers are likely to leave because of stress. “The lack of transparency and uncertainty, it’s clearly meant to make people uncomfortable and make people want to leave,” says a current forest-service scientist who requested anonymity so they could speak freely. The forest service did not immediately respond to the employee’s allegation.

After Trump’s return to office in early 2025, R&D probationary employees were fired and seasonal employees’ positions lapsed. Early retirements were encouraged. All told, the branch has lost one-third of the 1,550 employees it had at the start of Trump’s second term, including 475 who left voluntarily. The forest service’s second-in-command, associate chief Chris French, has said that R&D should shrink to 600 people, says Cynthia West, a former interim R&D leader who retired in January.

Some scientists outside the agency say widespread disruption has already stopped research.

Ram Oren, a forest ecologist at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, co-led a

15-year project that relied in part on a forest-service team that is now gone: everyone on the team retired early. “Some of the data that the forest service collected is somewhere on a computer,” says Oren. Nobody can access it. He’s also seen R&D staff members abandon their own projects. He’s left wondering: “How much research has been started and will not be completed?”

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-026-01493-w>

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