



Starving for Knowledge

An opinion piece titled “The U.S. Government Is Starving Its Own Scientists of Knowledge” by postdoctoral researcher Madison Sankovitz, originally published by Undark, argues for transparency. Below is an edited excerpt.

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Imagine trying to solve a complex problem without access to the instruction manual—or, worse, being told the manual was too expensive to keep on hand. That’s exactly what the federal government is doing to the scientists who protect our food systems, environments and public health.

I’m an entomologist funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to research pollinator health and invasive species. My work helps farmers, land managers and communities respond to urgent threats like pollinator decline. But in recent months, scientists like me have found themselves blocked from accessing the very tools we need to do that work—scientific journals.

Earlier this year, the USDA’s National Agricultural Library, or NAL, canceled access to a wide range of journals published by Oxford University Press, the National Academy of Sciences and others—about one fifth of the library’s original journals, according to a list obtained by Science. These aren’t academic luxuries. They’re essential sources of information that directly shapes our work in the lab and in the field. The NAL offers one of the world’s largest collections focused on agriculture and related sciences and serves other federal agencies and the general public as well as USDA scientists.

The implications are wide-reaching. Scientific journals are not easy to access, as they are often behind paywalls; scientists usually read them through an institutional account. For example, the average price for a chemistry journal subscription in 2025 is \$8,572. Without access to current literature, federally funded researchers risk duplicating work, missing proven solutions and making decisions based on outdated or incomplete information.

As a field-based scientist, I rely on peer-reviewed publications to understand shifting trends and threats in real time. Some might argue that access to a few high-impact journals is sufficient. But science doesn’t work that way—especially in agriculture. Pollinator health alone is influenced by

factors such as soil chemistry, pesticide interactions, climate variability and disease ecology. The best research often appears in specialized journals published by scientific societies—the same journals the NAL just cut off.

It's worth noting that many of the articles now locked behind paywalls were funded by the federal government in the first place. That means taxpayers are effectively paying twice: once to produce the science and again for lost efficiency when government researchers can't access it.

The decision to cancel these subscriptions was framed as a cost-saving measure. But it's a false economy. The cost of restoring access to these journals is likely a drop in the bucket compared to the cost of a single failed crop season due to poor pest management or delayed response to pest invasion.

Public research should be supported by public infrastructure. That includes access to knowledge. Congress can act to restore funding for the NAL's journal subscriptions. Agencies can also re-negotiate agreements with publishers or invest in broad-based open-access strategies. But whatever the path forward, the outcome should be clear: Researchers funded to serve the public should not be locked out of the knowledge required to do that job.

You can't fix what you can't see. And right now, scientists like me are being asked to solve some of our country's most urgent problems while being kept in the dark.