

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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

June 23, 2026

Dear Senator Cassidy,

As the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP Committee), you have the responsibility of evaluating the fitness of the President's nominee for the Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). I write today to urge you to hold a public hearing on the nomination of Jim O'Neill, who President Trump tapped for the role on March 2, 2026.<sup>1</sup>

The past year and a half has been tumultuous for NSF as it navigated the early departure of the previous Director,<sup>2</sup> a sudden eviction from its built-for-purpose headquarters,<sup>3</sup> a major reorganization after a 35 percent reduction in staff,<sup>4,5</sup> and the unprecedented firing of the entire National Science Board.<sup>6</sup> Since last April, the agency has been without a Presidentially appointed leader, and chaos has ensued. The agency has made reckless decisions that have

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<sup>1</sup> "Nominations Sent to the Senate," The White House, March 2, 2026, accessed here:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/03/nominations-sent-to-the-senate-4e42/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Statement by Director Sethuraman Panchanathan on his departure," U.S. National Science Foundation, April 24, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nsf.gov/news/statement-director-sethuraman-panchanathan-his-departure>.

<sup>3</sup> "'This is bull—': National Science Foundation employees protest HUD's takeover," *NBC 4 Washington*, June 25, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/northern-virginia/this-is-bull-national-science-foundation-employees-protest-huds-takeover/3944316/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Mervis, "The National Science Foundation just had a big reorganization. Here are five things to know," *Science Magazine*, December 29, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.science.org/content/article/national-science-foundation-just-had-big-reorganization-here-are-five-things-know>.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Quinn, "NSF Plans to Boost Staffing, Halve Grant Solicitations," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 26, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/science-research-policy/2026/02/26/nsf-plans-boost-staffing-halve-grant>.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Garisto, "Entire NSF science advisory board fired by Trump administration," *Nature*, April 26, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-01361-7>.

wreaked havoc on the scientific community, and a number of those actions have been subsequently undone either by court orders or by the agency’s own erratic, reactionary decision making.<sup>7,8</sup> It would be a huge mistake to rubber stamp the President’s nominee for Director without a public assessment of whether Mr. O’Neill has the expertise and the temperament to lead the agency into steadier times ahead, for the sake of NSF employees, the scientific community, and American taxpayers.

Frankly, Mr. O’Neill is largely untested on matters related to stewarding the crown jewel of this nation’s scientific enterprise. This makes it all the more crucial that he appears before the HELP Committee in a public fashion. If confirmed, Mr. O’Neill would be the first Director in NSF’s 76-year history who is not a scientist or an engineer, as he lacks both a technical degree and any research experience. The few things we do know about Mr. O’Neill on matters of science leave much to be examined before entrusting him with such a weighty responsibility. In 2020, Mr. O’Neill pushed for the use of unproven treatments for COVID-19 such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine – of course, this is an exercise of Mr. O’Neill’s right to free speech, but such evidence-free blustering could be catastrophic if it were to come from the mouth of a Senate-confirmed Director of the nation’s preeminent scientific agency.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. O’Neill has already served a brief stint as a public servant during this Administration, and the six months he spent at the helm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cause me deep concern about his decision making. In December 2025, during his tenure, the CDC announced a sole-source award of \$1.6 million to an unsolicited Danish research proposal to conduct a deeply unethical study on infants in Guinea-Bissau.<sup>10</sup> The study’s purpose was clearly to bolster Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.’s, anti-vaccine agenda. While this Administration makes sweeping declarations about the value of “gold-standard science,” Secretary Kennedy and Acting Director O’Neill chose to direct taxpayer money to a research group that has been hotly criticized for publishing nonreproducible work that has been repeatedly debunked.<sup>11</sup> You are a medical doctor and a longtime proponent of vaccines that have been proven safe and effective, such as the hepatitis B vaccine that would have been the focus of this misguided and expensive endeavor. The American people deserve a

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<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Hogue, “Judge overturns NSF’s 15% cap on indirect costs of research,” *Chemical & Engineering News*, July 14, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/northern-virginia/this-is-bull-national-science-foundation-employees-protest-huds-takeover/3944316/>.

<sup>8</sup> Maxine Joselow, “Trump Administration Backs Off Plan to End Ocean Monitoring,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/18/climate/trump-ocean-observatories-initiative.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Maanvi Singh and Robert Mackey, “Who is Jim O’Neill? CDC Chief set to bolster RFK Jr. plan to remake vaccine policy,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/28/jim-oneill-cdc-profile>.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Offord, “CDC funds controversial hepatitis B vaccine trial in African newborns,” *Science Magazine*, December 18, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.science.org/content/article/cdc-funds-controversial-hepatitis-b-vaccine-trial-african-newborns>.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Allen, “A Danish Couple’s Maverick African Research Finds Its Moment in RFK Jr.’s Vaccine Policy,” *Wired*, May 18, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.wired.com/story/a-danish-couples-maverick-african-research-finds-its-moment-in-rfk-jrs-vaccine-policy/>.

public hearing where you and your HELP colleagues drill down on Mr. O’Neill’s involvement in this deeply unscientific, unethical, wasteful decision that happened while he was leading the CDC; though Guinea-Bissau’s government halted the study, we must not ignore the fact that U.S. decision makers were going to allow it to happen, at significant cost to American taxpayers.<sup>12</sup> As Director of NSF, awarding taxpayer money to meritorious, ethical research will be a critical part of Mr. O’Neill’s job. This attempt to fund this anti-vaccine study raises questions about Mr. O’Neill’s fitness for such a role, and I implore you to publicly examine his involvement in this decision.

During Mr. O’Neill’s tenure at CDC, you did call for rejecting scientific decision making that emerged from illegitimate processes. When the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices sought to meet last September after being reconstituted with anti-vaccine crusaders, you demanded that the committee postpone their meeting amidst the “current turmoil in CDC leadership.”<sup>13</sup> I ask that you use your power at the helm of the HELP Committee to elicit commitments of seriousness and deference to scientific expertise from Mr. O’Neill. Our global scientific leadership, and the responsible and ethical use of taxpayer dollars, depends on it.

Sincerely,



Zoe Lofgren  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

cc: Bernie Sanders, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Brian Babin, Chairman, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Donati, “Guinea-Bissau stops vaccine study funded by Trump administration,” *Reuters*, February 18, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/guinea-bissau-stops-vaccine-study-funded-by-trump-administration-2026-02-18/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Cassidy Calls for Vaccine Committee Meeting to be Postponed Following CDC Departures,” U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, August 28, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.help.senate.gov/rep/newsroom/press/cassidy-calls-for-vaccine-committee-meeting-to-be-postponed-following-cdc-departures>.