

MPA NEWS



Published on *MPA News* (<https://mpanews.openchannels.org>)

Impacts of the US government shutdown on federal MPAs: Some of the world's largest MPAs had just one person working at them this past month

Due to an impasse in recent weeks between US President Donald Trump and Congress over whether to spend billions of dollars to extend the wall on the nation's southern border, about one-quarter of the government was shut down – with no funding to conduct operations – and most employees furloughed for a period that stretched to 35 days. Finally, on 25 January, President Trump announced the full government would be reopened for three weeks to allow time for more negotiations on the border wall. However, if there is no resolution by mid-February, another shutdown remains a possibility.

The December-January shutdown heavily impacted US federal MPAs. These include National Marine Sanctuaries and Marine National Monuments, among other sites, and are some of the largest MPAs in the world, like the 1.5-million km² Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Nearly the entire staffs of these sites were not allowed to come to work during the shutdown and received no paychecks, although back pay has been promised for federal employees (not for contractors).

For insights on the shutdown's impacts, MPA News interviewed a US federal worker familiar with federal MPAs. Due to the politically charged nature of the shutdown and the possibility of harassment for speaking out against it, the worker requested that their identity be kept anonymous to readers. MPA News agreed to this.

MPA News: First of all, how are you doing? I expect this month was very frustrating. And it's possible it could be repeated in three weeks.

I'm fine. I'm fortunate to have savings and a spouse whose income isn't tied to the federal government. But I heard from friends and colleagues that some federal workers were, and are, really worried about their finances – having to talk to lenders and others to ask for delayed payments for mortgages and child care, not being able to make basic household repairs, and, most importantly, worrying about the future and how long this would go on. And it's incredibly frustrating that the shutdown was needless – just a power play to try to force an agenda that has very little political support.

What impacts did the shutdown have on Sanctuary and Monument staffing? Were the sites essentially abandoned this past month? Was there anyone patrolling?

Each site has had at least one "exempted" staff member who was able to do some work to address key operational and emergency issues. This doesn't mean that they were working full time, but that they are checking email and answering the phone to handle emergencies. Enforcement within Sanctuaries* is a partnership with NOAA Fisheries and the Coast Guard, and in some cases with States, such as Florida. So in some cases, partners were a presence on the water. Of course, there were no research or education Sanctuaries staff at work, so they were not on the water. Given the [environmental damage](#) that has occurred in some terrestrial National Parks (and what I feel is poor leadership in allowing uncontrolled access to sensitive areas), enforcement of federal US MPAs like Sanctuaries is a concern.

What impacts did the shutdown have on research and monitoring? We know the private National Marine Sanctuary Foundation has [stepped in to run the annual Ocean Count](#) monitoring program at Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, but I imagine there was a lot of other monitoring that went quiet.

It's likely that there will be gaps in monitoring due to the shutdown. Staff members were not allowed to conduct routine business like maintaining acoustic buoys, or working with university partners on research and monitoring. Gaps in research and monitoring are among the many tasks that will need to be addressed once we get back to work.

What impacts has the shutdown had on staff morale and other management aspects?

I think the shutdown has been very damaging to morale – for federal employees, contractors, partners and fellows. We do this work because we care about a healthy ocean, and it's hard to just shut that off (or find another way to direct that energy) until we can go back to work. We've not been allowed to check work email, so we've all felt very isolated from our colleagues and partners. The whole class of Knauss Fellows (a program that supplies federal agencies with marine policy fellows for one year), who have relocated to Washington DC to begin their fellowships on 1 February, have been told that the start of their fellowships will be delayed (probably for a couple of weeks after the government reopens). And they're not being paid. I know of one Fellow who is looking for temporary work to pay the bills until they can start work. We're very grateful to partners like the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, which has staff who work in support of the Sanctuaries and were still able to work during the shutdown. But I've worried about contractors who may not have been able to work, and don't have the reassurance of knowing they will eventually be paid. It's been hard being out of touch with my "work family", who are good friends. We've had a couple of happy-hour gatherings to get together and provide a chance to catch up and provide moral support.

This shutdown lasted over a month (the longest in US history), and there is a chance it could happen again three weeks from now. Is there a point beyond which there could be irreversible damage to some sites – ecologically or managerially?

The length of this shutdown is a big worry. The threats to our oceans do not let up while the government is shut down. There are important activities and programs that don't take place if we can't work. While it sounds mundane, we've been in danger of missing deadlines for contracts and grants that have big impacts on our ability to get work done. We missed meetings of Advisory Committees that work with US MPAs, as well as opportunities to add new members, and will need to catch up when we return to work – hampering the ability of outside experts to participate in our work. We also missed opportunities to participate in key scientific and management meetings that help set the agenda for future partnerships and priorities. We'll be months behind schedule in filling key positions that are currently vacant – including Sanctuary superintendent jobs. And we know there will be a huge backlog when we finally are back to work. We'll have to set priorities for what we can do quickly, what will have to wait even longer, and what we may have to give up on – at least for now – due to lost time and manpower.

** Note: The Sanctuaries System includes 13 National Marine Sanctuaries and two Marine National Monuments (Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll). Other Marine National Monuments are managed by other federal offices or agencies.*

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