



## United States Congressional Appropriations Process

Most federal government spending in the United States falls under two categories: Mandatory or Discretionary. Mandatory spending accounts for approximately 60 percent of the federal budget and includes statutory entitlement programs, like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.<sup>1</sup> Mandatory established by law and thus do not require annual funds most government operations—including federal 12 appropriations bills, in what’s often referred to as

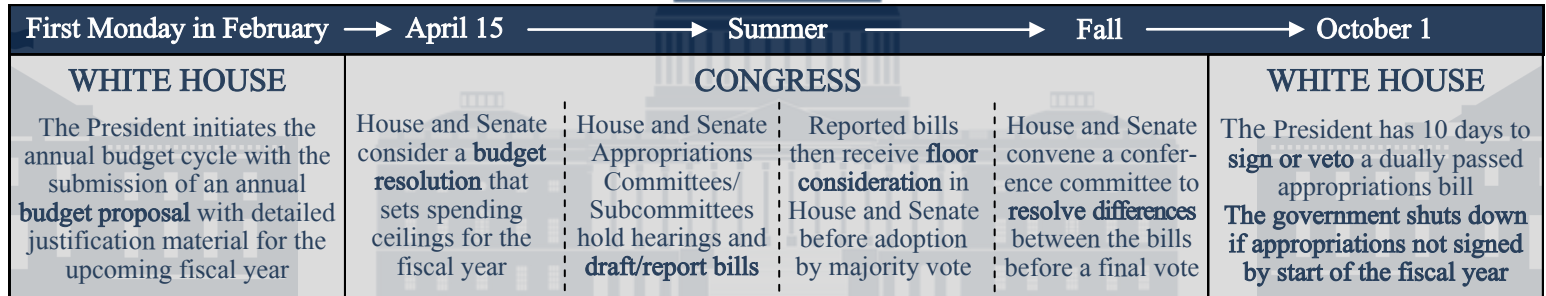
Discretionary spending, on the other hand, agency budgets—and is set on an annual basis through the congressional appropriations process.<sup>2</sup>

### Methods

The power to appropriate is a legislative power.<sup>2</sup> As a Congress in a series of 12 appropriations acts that government operations. These acts expire at the end of begins on October 1 and ends on September 30.<sup>2</sup>



result, annual appropriations are set through law by provide funding authority for discretionary the federal fiscal year. The federal fiscal year (FY)



Timetable of congressional appropriations process (Credit: Adapted from 2016 CRS Report)

While the above timetable gives a simplified version of the regular congressional appropriations process, this exact process is rarely followed and can take a variety of forms. In fact, since FY1977, Congress and the President have completed all regular appropriations acts before the start of the FY only four times: FY1977, FY1989, FY1995, and FY1997.

If regular appropriations bills are not adopted by the start of the new FY, Congress may adopt a continuing resolution (CR) to extend the appropriations process until regular bills are enacted or to continue current government spending levels through the next FY. Congress may also stray from the regular appropriations process by producing an omnibus or “minibus” appropriations measure or by providing additional discretionary funds during a FY through supplemental appropriations bills. An omnibus or “minibus” appropriations measure is when Congress combines several (or just a couple) of the regular appropriations bills into a single legislative vehicle to be considered all at once. For example, after the deadline for much of the FY2017 appropriations bills was extended by a CR, Congress and the President eventually passed a FY2017 omnibus appropriations act on May 5, 2017, to fund the government through September 30, 2017.<sup>3</sup> When progress on regular appropriations bills stall, Congress may try to resolve outstanding issues through an omnibus bill, which can allow for greater negotiation/trade-offs across the remaining bills.

### Results

In the Budget Resolution, Congress establishes overall federal spending limits across 20 functional categories, which includes Natural Resources and the Environment (Function 300).<sup>4</sup> In FY2016, Function 300 received a little more than one percent of total government funds—down from 2.5 percent in the 1970s. Once the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations receive their spending ceilings for the upcoming fiscal year, they then sub-allocate that budget authority to each of the 12 appropriations subcommittees with jurisdiction over the various appropriations bills. Each of the 12 appropriations subcommittees/bills detail the funding for groups of related federal agencies, departments, and/or activities. For example, most natural resource agencies receive their annual funding through either the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies; or Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bills.

### Discussion

As a percentage of the federal budget, funding for Function 300 has gradually declined over the past four decades. The Office of Management and Budget estimates that by 2022, Function 300 will receive less than 0.75 percent of the federal budget.<sup>4</sup>

### Implications for Wildlife Professionals

Federal appropriations determine allocations for federal agencies that manage wildlife resources in addition to federal grant programs, like State and Tribal Wildlife Grants. Securing and maintaining robust funding for wildlife conservation through the congressional appropriations process enables wildlife professionals to provide on-the-ground support for wildlife and their habitats.

# United States Appropriations Process: Features



## Authorization Measures vs. Appropriations Measures<sup>2</sup>

Typically, an authorization act establishes, continues, or modifies an agency or program, and includes an explicit authorization for subsequent appropriations. The authorization for appropriations may include a permanent, annual, or multiyear authorization. Congressional rules generally restrict appropriations to only those agencies or programs previously authorized by law. However, Congress is not required to provide the authorized amount through the discretionary appropriations process and may restrict how appropriated funds are used through a limitation rider. Moreover, despite congressional restrictions, “unauthorized” appropriations regularly occur, and if enacted with an appropriations act, become available to the agency for obligation as specified by Congress.

Since 2015, a limitation rider has prohibited the listing of sage grouse as endangered (Credit: BLM)<sup>5</sup>

## Budget Control Act of 2011 & Sequestration<sup>6,7</sup>

In 2011, Congress passed the Budget Control Act to impose statutory limitations on federal discretionary spending for each year FY2012 through FY2021. Under the Act, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is required to issue a report that provides estimates of the limits on discretionary budget authority in effect for each FY through 2021. If enacted legislation for the FY exceeds those “caps” then a sequestration is required. CBO defines sequestration as “automatic spending cuts that occur through the withdrawal of funding for certain (but not all) government programs.” In 2015, the Bipartisan Budget Act cancelled the automatic reductions in discretionary spending for FY2016 and FY2017. However, CBO estimates that in FY2018 the defense cap will shrink by \$54 billion and the non-defense cap will shrink by \$37 billion with the reductions apportioned among the various budget accounts within the two categories.

Bodie Hills, CA (Credit: Bob Wick, BLM)



## Government Shutdown<sup>8,9</sup>

A government shutdown refers to the process that the Executive Branch must enter when Congress and the President fail to pass an appropriations bill funding the operations of a government agency. Since 1870, Congress has placed restrictions on the expenditure of funds in excess of appropriations made by Congress for that FY. As a result, if Congress and the President fail to allocate funds by the start of the new FY (or extend the appropriations deadline through a CR), then the federal government is prohibited from obligating federal funds in that FY. In other words, the government shuts down. Unfunded federal agencies and programs are required to cease operations until a budget is passed or spending is otherwise permitted. This may include national parks and wildlife refuges, potentially halting management and research activities on those lands.

Closure of Yosemite National Park during 2013 government shutdown (Credit: daveynln, Flickr)

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