The American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) is concerned by the cancellation of the EcoHealth Alliance grant because it appears that this was done for political reasons rather than due to scientific merit. ASCB believes strongly that decisions about funding of science should be guided by peer-reviewed scientific review and not by political expediency. The National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded program run by EcoHealth Alliance searched for new coronaviruses that could become a future pandemic and has already found hundreds of coronaviruses, including SARS and COVID-19. According to EcoHealth Alliance, two coronaviruses identified using funds with the canceled grant have been used to test Remdesivir, one of the first treatments available for those suffering from COVID-19.

During an April 17, 2020 White House press conference, President Trump was asked why the U.S. government, under the Obama Administration, gave a research lab in China $3.7 million. In response, the President said that the grant would be ended “very quickly.” On April 24, 2020, the NIH informed EcoHealth Alliance that their grant would be canceled.

In the middle of a COVID-19-related Congressional hearing in June, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, confirmed what led to the cancelation of the EcoHealth grant. When Dr. Fauci was asked why the grant was canceled, he responded “Why was it canceled? It was canceled because the NIH was told to cancel it.” Fauci continued, "I don’t know the reason, but we were told to cancel it."

The manipulation of the scientific process at any time is wrong and harmful to science. It is particularly distressing when, as a pandemic spreads around the world, a highly regarded research grant, which looks for the origins of that virus, is canceled with no consideration of the details or the implications.

Not only is this harmful to immediate efforts by the scientific community to discover treatments and cures for COVID-19, but it has a chilling effect on others in the U.S. scientific community. As they consider exploring cutting edge discoveries, politically-motivated interference, like the cancellation of the EcoHealth Alliance grant during a press conference, may make them hesitant to explore these new areas of science.

NIH’s process of approving, and sometimes rejecting, grants is a very deliberative, thoughtful process. It has served the NIH research community well and must be supported and not replaced.