



10 Ways the Sequester Will Expose Americans to Greater Health Risks and Other Perils

Daniel J. Weiss, Michael Conathan, and Jessica Goad

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“Beware the ides of March.”

— *“Julius Caesar,” William Shakespeare*

The Ides of March falls on the 15th of March every year, but this year that fateful date and the impending doom it foretells could arrive two weeks early—on March 1, when \$85 billion in automatic federal spending cuts are set to occur.¹ The so-called sequester will slash 5.3 percent in funding from every federal program except Social Security and Medicaid. For public health and clean energy programs, the sequester means less protection from air pollution and the health problems associated with it, less assistance after severe extreme weather events, more oil imports, fewer permits for oil and gas production on federal lands and waters, and reduced accessibility to our national parks. In short, it’s clear that sequestration will harm middle- and lower-income Americans.

1. More families exposed to the cold and heat

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, provided \$3.4 billion in fiscal year 2012 to assist low-income seniors and other households with their heating and cooling bills.² The National Energy Assistance Directors’ Association, which runs low-income energy assistance programs, reports that, “LIHEAP recipient households are likely to be vulnerable to temperature extremes” and that many of them have medical and other significant expenses.³

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program provides aid to 8.9 million households, but “only 20 percent of the families eligible for

Sequestration will have major—and negative—impacts on energy and environmental management agencies. Here’s how it will affect all Americans.

1. More families exposed to the cold and heat
2. Children and seniors more vulnerable to air pollution
3. Less investment in clean drinking water and sewage treatment
4. Families and businesses receiving less assistance after extreme weather events
5. Less protection from wildfires
6. Less accurate weather forecasting
7. More dependence on foreign energy imports; more expensive clean energy
8. Less oil and gas production from federal lands and waters
9. National park closures and staff reductions
10. More dangerous seas

assistance received LIHEAP aid,” according to a 2012 letter from 137 U.S. representatives to the House Appropriations Committee.⁴

The sequester will axe an estimated \$180 million in funding from the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Since the average household received \$450 from the program in 2011, this would mean preventing some 400,000 households from receiving aid from the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.⁵

The Weatherization Assistance Program helps to weatherize the homes of low-income families, making them more energy efficient and saving the typical household \$400 in their annual heating and cooling costs. Moreover, the Department of Energy reports that:

Funding reductions under sequestration will reduce by more than a thousand the number of homes that would be weatherized in FY2013 and could result in the unemployment of 1,200 skilled weatherization professionals.⁶

2. Children and seniors more vulnerable to air pollution

Sequestration will slash funds used to protect children, senior citizens, and those suffering from other illnesses. These populations are most vulnerable to harm from smog, soot, mercury, and other hazardous pollutants that can lead to asthma attacks, respiratory ailments, learning impairment, and even premature death.⁷

The Environmental Protection Agency warns that sequestration would harm vital programs that reduce air pollution by:

- Reducing the funding that the Environmental Protection Agency provides to states to monitor air quality, forcing the shutdown of some critical air-monitoring sites. These monitoring sites provide essential data that is needed to reduce air pollution.
- Cutting the number of “environmental cops” on the beat—the inspectors who enforce environmental laws. Enforcement is needed to protect the public from pollution levels that violate public health standards.
- Lowering the number of inspections of power plants, oil refineries, and other major polluters to ensure that they comply with pollution limits. Sequestration could result in 1,000 fewer inspections of potential violators in 2013.⁸

Harold Wimmer, president and CEO of the American Lung Association, noted that:

As a nation we’ve been making lifesaving progress in the fight against lung disease, but continued progress takes continued funding. Across-the-board cuts could stop this hard-earned progress in its tracks.⁹

3. Less investment in clean drinking water and sewage treatment

The Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act include revolving loan funds to help states finance drinking water purification and sewage treatment facilities—both of which are essential to the country’s public-health infrastructure. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that:

Reductions under sequestration would impact states’ ability to meet drinking water public health standards and to reduce the nitrogen and phosphorus pollution that contaminate drinking water supplies, cause toxic algae blooms, and deprive waters of oxygen that fish need to survive.

This reduction would result in the elimination of more than 100 water quality protection and restoration projects throughout the United States.¹⁰

Drinking water and wastewater treatment are already badly underfunded. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that they have capital needs of at least \$31.6 billion per year.¹¹

4. Families and businesses receiving less assistance after extreme weather events

There were 25 very severe climate-related droughts, floods, storms, wildfires, and heat waves in 2011 and 2012—extreme weather events that caused 1,100 fatalities and up to \$188 billion in damage.¹²

Sequestration will slash funds for both extreme-weather recovery efforts and future community-resilience efforts. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano said in her testimony before the Senate on February 14, 2012, that:

Sequestration would reduce the Disaster Relief Fund ... by over \$1 billion, affecting survivors recovering from Hurricane Sandy, the tornadoes in Tuscaloosa and Joplin, and other major disasters across the Nation, as well as the economic recoveries of local economies in those regions.

Sequestration cuts could also require the [Federal Emergency Management Agency] to implement Immediate Needs Funding Restrictions late in the fiscal year during what is historically the season for tornados, wild fires, and hurricanes.¹³

Like the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency reports that sequestration “would inhibit the development of techniques and procedures for communities to prepare for and recover from natural disasters and industrial accidents.”¹⁴

5. Less protection from wildfires

The past two years saw record wildfire seasons across the United States. The National Climate Assessment draft report observes that, “increased warming, due to climate change, and drought have increased wildfires.”¹⁵ The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which includes the Forest Service, cautioned that sequestration will make it more difficult to fight fires.

This level of reduced funds would result in an appropriated funding level that is \$42 million below the calculated 10-year average of fire suppression costs for FY 2013.

The agency would complete as many as 200,000 fewer acres of hazardous fuel treatments, resulting in an increased risk to communities from wildfires.¹⁶

6. Less accurate weather forecasting

The future of accurate and advance forecasting of extreme weather events was already at risk before sequestration due to delays in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s satellite program that provides data to track storms. *The New York Times* reported in October 2012 that, “The United States is facing a year or more without crucial” polar-orbiting weather satellites.¹⁷ Sequestration could also add to this gap in weather-forecasting capability by further delaying the launch of replacements for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s aging geostationary satellites.

The Department of Commerce projects that sequestration will add an additional “2-3 year launch delay” for the next geostationary satellites, “which track severe weather events such as hurricanes and tornadoes.”¹⁸ It will also reduce flight hours for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s hurricane-prediction aircraft and cut maintenance and operations costs for ground-based weather radars and forecasting equipment. With climate change boosting the frequency and/or severity of storms, the last thing we should be doing is reducing our capacity to forecast them.

7. More dependence on foreign energy imports; more expensive clean energy

The United States has become more energy independent over the past four years, cutting oil imports from 57 percent to 42 percent between 2008 and 2012.¹⁹ Some of this progress could be undone if sequestration occurs. The Department of Energy warns:

Under sequestration, funding reductions would decelerate the Nation’s transition to a clean energy economy, and could weaken efforts to become more energy independent and energy secure.

A reduction in funding would slow down the significant advances made in making solar energy cost competitive with conventional forms of electricity generation, as well as cut funding for solar industry job training that is targeted at military veterans.²⁰

Meanwhile, China, Australia, and other nations continue to lower the cost of their solar electricity.²¹ Disinvesting in our efforts to lower solar costs will harm our economic competitiveness in this burgeoning industry.

8. Less oil and gas production from federal lands and waters

Two factors have contributed to lower oil imports: modern fuel economy standards that are reducing oil consumption and increased domestic oil production on private lands, federal lands, and federal waters that is replacing the need for foreign oil.²² But this domestic production from federal areas will slow if sequestration occurs. The Department of Interior noted:

Efforts to expedite processing of offshore oil and gas permitting in the Gulf of Mexico would be thwarted by delays, putting at risk some of the [pending] 550 exploration plans.

Approximately 300 fewer onshore oil and gas leases would be issued in Western states such as Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico, delaying prospective production from those lease tracts and deferring payments to the Treasury.²³

Since oil prices are set on a world market, the production of more domestic oil does not affect them. The Associated Press tested the theory that more U.S. drilling would lower gasoline prices, conducting an exhaustive analysis of 36 years of monthly U.S. oil production and gasoline price data. The Associated Press found “No statistical correlation between how much oil comes out of U.S. wells and the price at the pump.”²⁴

Having more domestic production—and fewer imports—improves our trade balance and keeps more of the money we spend on gasoline in the United States, where it can be recycled through the economy. Having fewer imports also reduces our reliance on oil from unstable regimes such as Nigeria and Venezuela.

9. National park closures and staff reductions

Sequester cuts will significantly impact America’s 398 national parks. The Department of Interior projects that, “the public should be prepared for reduced hours and services” at our national parks.²⁵ Cuts could lead to closures of parts or all of certain parks, elimination of some park rangers, and fewer visitor services such as educational programs. As Maureen Finnerty, chairwoman of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees,

put it, “This is very troubling, and it has the potential to turn already budget-strapped national parks into ghost towns.”²⁶

Such funding losses will also reduce the national parks’ tremendous value as economic generators. In 2011 the country’s national parks stimulated \$31 billion in economic activity and supported more than 258,000 jobs. The Department of Interior notes that, “local communities and business that rely on recreation to support their livelihoods would face a loss of income from reduced visitation to national parks.”²⁷

According to *Greenwire*, in January a leaked memo from the National Park Service suggested that in order to meet the budget demands of the sequester “the agency would need to slash \$110 million from the \$2.2 billion remaining in its budget over the next seven months.”²⁸ The National Park Service’s analysis listed what the cuts will be to each national park if a 5 percent budget cut occurs across the board. The parks that would suffer from the largest cuts had nearly 76 million visits in 2012.

TABLE 1
National Park Service’s sequester cuts to national park budgets

National park	States	2012 visits (in millions)	Sequester cut (in millions)
Yellowstone National Park	Montana, Wyoming	3.4	\$1.8
National Mall and Memorial Parks	Washington, D.C.	24	\$1.6
Yosemite National Park	California	3.9	\$1.4
Gateway National Recreation Area	New Jersey, New York	5	\$1.3
Independence National Historic Park	Pennsylvania	3.6	\$1.2
Grand Canyon National Park	Arizona	4.4	\$1.1
Great Smoky Mountains National Park	Tennessee	9.7	\$0.9
Lake Mead National Recreation Area	Arizona, Nevada	6.3	\$0.9
Golden Gate National Recreation Area	California	14.5	\$0.9
Everglades National Park	Florida	1.1	\$0.8
Total		75.9	\$11.9

Source: National Park Service

10. More dangerous seas

The U.S. Coast Guard is our nation’s first line of defense against maritime threats to our homeland security, a lifeline for mariners in distress, and among our key first responders when extreme weather strikes. Recall the heroics of Coast Guard rescuers who plucked thousands of people off rooftops following Hurricane Katrina and rescued 12 of 14 crew members from a tall ship that sank off the coast of North Carolina at the height of Hurricane Sandy.²⁹

Its operations are drastically underfunded, however, and its vessels are virtually obsolete. Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-NC), Chairman of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, said in 2012 that even the pre-sequester Coast Guard budget “bluntly guts operational capabilities.”³⁰ The Coast Guard reports, “With the average cutter age at 43 years, the HEC [High Endurance Cutter] fleet has become increasingly difficult to maintain and sustain operationally.”³¹

In December 2012 the Coast Guard’s District 13 Commander in Seattle said that sequestration’s cuts would be “catastrophic” to his district’s operations.³² According to a letter to Congress from Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, sequestration will curtail Coast Guard air and sea operations by as much as 25 percent, exposing America to a greater risk of maritime terrorist attacks and imperiling all Americans at sea.³³

Conclusion

The massive spending cuts mandated by the sequester reduce protection for children, seniors, and other vulnerable people; increase dependence on foreign oil; and impair some first responders to extreme weather. At the same time, it will leave untouched special tax breaks for the five biggest oil companies—BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Shell.³⁴ These five companies, which made a combined \$255 billion in profits over the past two years, will also continue to receive \$2.4 billion annually from special tax breaks, according to the Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation.³⁵ Something is wrong when heating assistance for low-income families and seniors is cut so that ExxonMobil can keep its tax breaks.

The looming budget sequester will harm American families and seniors and children in particular. The critical services provided by agencies that protect our air and drinking water, provide crucial aid after extreme weather, help those Americans who are least well off pay their energy bills, and protect our national parks require that Congress takes a balanced approach to reducing the federal budget deficit. Across-the-board budget cuts to these and other public health, energy, and environmental programs is not the solution.

Daniel J. Weiss is a Senior Fellow and the Director of Climate Strategy at the Center for American Progress. Michael Conathan is the Director of Ocean Policy at the Center. Jessica Goad is the Manager of Research and Outreach for the Center for American Progress’s Public Lands Project.

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