SEVEN DAYS *The news in brief*

POLICY

US budget cuts?

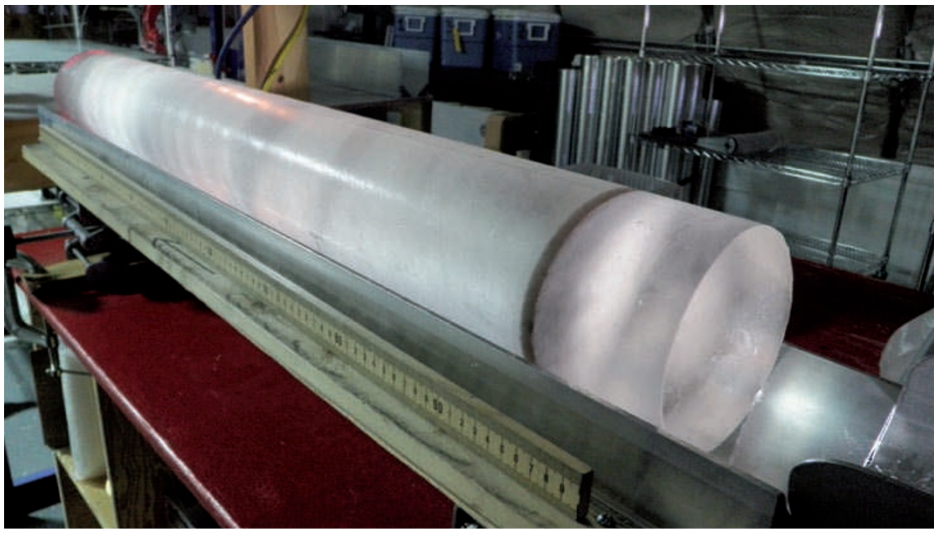
The Republican-controlled US House of Representatives released a budget on 3 February that could mean cuts in federal science funding for the remainder of the 2011 fiscal year (March–September). Among the proposals was a 16% decrease from 2010 levels for the commerce, science, and justice subcommittee, which funds agencies such as NASA and the National Science Foundation. Each subcommittee must now make spending recommendations, which will have to find agreement with the Democrat-controlled Senate and President Barack Obama. See go.nature.com/mdzxmq for more.

Stem-cell tangle

The legal uncertainty over the status of research using human embryonic stem (ES) cells in the United States is harming work on stem cells in general, according to a survey of 370 researchers released on 3 February (A. D. Levine *Cell Stem Cell* **8**, 132–135; 2011). Scientists in the poll said that they were delaying research or moving away from work involving human ES cells. See pages 156–159 for more on the ongoing US lawsuit on the use of such cells.

Clinical research

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has launched an elite programme to create a new breed of physician–scientists. The scheme will support three medically trained scholars to conduct clinical research on the NIH's campus in Bethesda, Maryland, for 5–7 years at a cost of around US$1 million a year each. They will then get up to $500,000 funding for another 5–6 years at the NIH or elsewhere. The scheme will eventually support 20–30 researchers. See go.nature.com/189ljt for more.



H. ROOP

Record ice core drilled

Researchers at the West Antarctic Ice Sheet Divide Ice Core project have drilled a column of ice nearly as long as ten Empire State Buildings stacked on top of one another. Gas bubbles in the 3,330-metre-long core, the final section of which was extracted on 28 January, should provide a 100,000-year climate record. It is the longest ice core ever drilled solely by US scientists, and the second longest ever made. A joint team of Russian, US and French scientists completed the longest ice core, at 3,623 metres, in 1998. See go.nature.com/ffgeg7 for more.

Scientific integrity

The US Department of the Interior laid out a new policy on scientific integrity on 1 February, including a ban on political appointees altering technical findings. The department has been the quickest agency to respond to a March 2009 memo from President Barack Obama that promised to put sound science at the centre of government policy-making. See go.nature.com/jdziwy for more.

Europe united

Heads of the European Union member states have set themselves a deadline of 2014 for completing the European Research Area: a concept that sees Europe as a unified entity in which researchers and funding can move freely across national borders. Single European patents, portable research grants and transferable pensions are the main sticking points. The agreement was made at a European Council summit on 4 February.

Perchlorate ruling

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will start to regulate perchlorate in drinking water — a significant moment in a debate that has raged since the late 1990s, when the chemical was discovered in many water supplies. Perchlorate interferes with the production of thyroid hormones and mainly leaches into the environment from its use in the manufacture of rocket fuel and explosives. Under President George W. Bush, the EPA had decided in 2008 that regulation was not needed. Lisa Jackson, head of the EPA, announced the reversal of that decision on 2 February.

RESEARCH

Retractions rise

A case of scientific misconduct at the Research Center Borstel in Germany is assuming alarming proportions. The centre, which launched an investigation last July, said last week that retractions are under way of 6 further papers produced by current and former members of its immunology group, making a total of 12 withdrawn publications. The head of the group, immunologist

Silvia Bulfone-Paus, says that two former postdocs manipulated images without her knowledge. See go.nature.com/kmyalr for more.

Year of forests

The United Nations (UN) launched its International Year of Forests in New York on 2 February. Marking the event, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN in Rome released a biennial assessment of global forests issues. *State of the World's Forests 2011* says that the rate of deforestation has slowed in the past decade, but remains "alarmingly high". The report emphasizes that local communities' knowledge about managing forests should be taken into account in top-down efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from deforestation.

Arctic fishing

Fishing catches in the seasonally ice-free Arctic Sea by Russia, the United States and Canada were 75 times greater than reported to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization from 1950 to 2006, according to estimates published last week (D. Zeller *et al. Polar Biol.* doi:10.1007/s00300-010-0952-3; 2011). The calculated total over the period, some 950,000 tonnes, is still small. Researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, said that unreported subsistence fishing was mainly responsible.

REUTERS/E. QUEIROZ/A CRITICA

Amazon pain

According to satellite observations, the drought last year in the Amazon basin (**pictured**) was even more widespread and intense than the dry spell in 2005, which had been thought to be a once-in-a-century occurrence. If such arid conditions continue, the world's largest rainforest might no longer buffer increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide, wrote researchers on 3 February (S. L. Lewis *et al. Science* **331,** 554; 2011).

Medical detectives

An effort to find the causes of mystery illnesses has declared its first success. Researchers at the Undiagnosed Diseases Program at the US National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, pinpointed the genetic mutation that causes a rare artery-hardening condition (C. St Hilaire *et al. N. Engl. J. Med.* **364,** 432–442; 2011). See go.nature.com/1naxqr for more.

BUSINESS

Obesity drug upset

US regulators have rejected another obesity drug, despite an earlier recommendation from advisers to conditionally approve it. On 1 February, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) told Orexigen Therapeutics of La Jolla, California, that concerns about the possible cardiovascular risks of the drug Contrave (naltrexone/bupropion) outweighed its weight-loss benefit. It asked for further clinical trials. Orexigen's share price fell by 72% following the news. Last year, the FDA rejected two other obesity drugs and asked for a third to be pulled off the market.

Research cutback

Pharmaceutical giant Pfizer on 1 February announced cuts to its research budget and the closure of its research centre in Sandwich, UK. Most of the 2,400 staff there are scientists. See pages 141 and 154 for more.

PEOPLE

Developing world

Romain Murenzi, a physicist and Rwanda's former science minister, was named on 7 February as the new executive director of TWAS, the academy of sciences for the developing world. Murenzi is expected to take up the post at TWAS headquarters in Trieste, Italy, around April; he will replace Mohamed Hassan, who has spent 25 years in the post. See go.nature.com/jf2zct for more.

ALS prize

American neurologist Seward Rutkove has won a US$1-million prize for creating a non-invasive tool that tracks the progress of the neurodegenerative disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The biomarker developed by Rutkove, of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts, detects diseased muscle tissue by sending electrical currents through the body. The ALS biomarker award was launched in 2006 by Prize4Life, a foundation based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to spur breakthroughs in treating the disease.

COMING UP

14 FEBRUARY
NASA's Stardust mission — rebranded NExT — is due to fly by the comet Tempel 1. It is the first follow-up mission to a comet: the Deep Impact mission targeted Tempel 1 five years ago.
go.nature.com/1ho7bt

14 FEBRUARY
US President Barack Obama submits his 2012 budget request.

17–21 FEBRUARY
The American Association for the Advancement of Science holds its annual meeting in Washington DC.
www.aaas.org

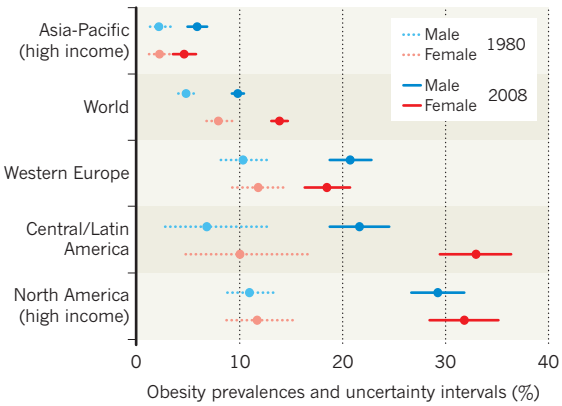
TREND WATCH

Obesity rates worldwide almost doubled between 1980 and 2008, an analysis of health-examination surveys has found (M. M. Finucane *et al. Lancet* doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(10)62037-5; 2011). In 2008, 9.8% of men and 13.8% of women were obese, as measured by a body-mass index (BMI) of at least 30 (kilograms weight per square metre of height). Rates of obesity were highest in men in North America and women in southern Africa, and lowest in south Asia for both men and women.

SOURCE: *LANCET*

THE WORLD GAINS WEIGHT

Obesity (BMI ≥ 30 kg m^{-2}) has increased fastest in the Americas.



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