

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

US budget blitzed

The US House of Representatives slashed billions of dollars from government science and environmental-protection agencies in a bill passed on 19 February. With the current federal budget expiring on 4 March, the bill was a 'continuing resolution' to fund the government until the 2011 fiscal year ends in September. The Senate is likely to reject the bill when it returns from recess on 28 February, but the landscape of cuts offers clues to Republican targets in the budget battle ahead. "It is truly, truly frightening," says Sally Yozell, director of policy at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Washington DC. See go.nature.com/jwwkwt for more.

Brazil cuts budget

Brazil's new president, Dilma Rousseff, is cutting the country's 2011 science budget as part of a broad strategy to lower public spending and keep inflation at bay. The Ministry of Science and Technology will receive only 6.4 billion real (US\$3.84 billion), it emerged last week, down from the 7.4-billion-real plan agreed by Congress. See go.nature.com/tpkeb7 for more.

Food safety at risk

The broad food-safety law signed by US President Barack Obama last month still leaves food-safety oversight fragmented across federal agencies, according to a report released on 16 February by the US Government Accountability Office. The biennial report, which catalogues government programmes at "high risk" for waste, fraud or abuse, also raises concerns about the Food and Drug Administration's



M. HUNTER/GETTY IMAGES

Earthquake devastates Christchurch

The 6.3-magnitude earthquake that struck Christchurch, New Zealand, on 22 February was probably part of a sequence of aftershocks that followed a 7.0-magnitude earthquake on 3 September 2010, according to the US Geological Survey. Although it was more

powerful, September's quake caused no deaths. The aftershock was shallower, much closer to Christchurch, and struck at a busy hour, just before 1 p.m. local time; 65 deaths were confirmed as *Nature* went to press. See go.nature.com/5cezck for more.

oversight of drugs and medical devices produced abroad, and the Environmental Protection Agency's monitoring of toxic chemicals. Similar issues were flagged in the 2009 edition of the report.

UK visa rules

Scientists needing visas to work in the United Kingdom will get priority over other workers under an immigration quota that takes effect from April. The Campaign for Science and Engineering, an advocacy group based in London, had feared that the government's decision last November to limit immigration of highly skilled workers from outside the European Union would put young, low-salaried researchers at a disadvantage. But the points system used to rank applications, published

on 16 February, shows that the government has decided to score scientists highly. The impact of related plans to limit student immigration is not yet clear. See go.nature.com/mmg98w for more.

BUSINESS

Huge pharma deal

Drug-maker sanofi-aventis has struck a deal to buy biotechnology company Genzyme of Cambridge, Massachusetts, ending more than six months of negotiations, it announced on 16 February. Sanofi, based in Paris, will pay US\$20.1 billion (\$74 per share), but the deal includes extra payments tied to the success of Genzyme's drug pipeline. Sanofi initially offered \$69 per share, which Genzyme rejected in August 2010. See page 449 for more.

RESEARCH

Egypt's antiquities

On 20 February, Egypt reopened its archaeological sites and six of its antiquities museums, including Cairo's Egyptian Museum, to visitors. Zahi Hawass, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo, said that, despite some looting during the revolution that deposed former president Hosni Mubarak, "relatively few" objects were missing from the museum.

Anthrax report

Scientific evidence used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) cannot alone prove the origin of anthrax bacteria mailed in the United States in 2001, which killed 5 people and made 17 ill, says a National Research

Council committee. The panel's independent review, released on 15 February, questioned FBI conclusions about the laboratory flask that was pinpointed as the source of the *Bacillus anthracis* bacteria, and about the skills required to grow anthrax spores. The FBI responded that it was correct to accuse the late microbiologist Bruce Ivins of the attacks, taking into account all the evidence in the case. See go.nature.com/21sfju for more.

Green economy

Investing US\$1.3 trillion — or 2% of global gross domestic product — every year between now and 2050 in environmental projects will spur economic growth, according to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme. The study, released in Nairobi on 21 February, recommends investment in sustainable agriculture, low-carbon energy and natural resources such as fisheries, drinking water and forests. The report is a primer for a UN conference on sustainable development, to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in May 2012. See go.nature.com/ae5uzu for more.

Whaling halted

Japan has called off its whale hunt in Antarctic waters about a month before the end of the whaling season. The

decision follows sustained attacks by the anti-whaling group the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, based in Friday Harbor, Washington. The society has sparred with Japanese fishing vessels every year since 2005 to disrupt their hunting in the Southern Ocean. This year's early halt, announced on 18 February, is a first. See go.nature.com/xukxhx for more.

Satellite switch-off

NASA turned off its Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE) as scheduled on 17 February. The telescope, launched in December 2009, completed its ten-month mission to record the entire sky in infrared wavelengths by October, and extended its mission by cataloguing near-Earth asteroids. The mission releases the first 57% of its data in April, and its full data set will be available in 2012. See go.nature.com/fy1tg8 for more.

Computer wins quiz

In an internationally publicized victory for computer science, the supercomputer Watson trounced two human contestants on the US television quiz programme *Jeopardy!* last week. The system is based on IBM's DeepQA project, one of a number of projects that aim to analyse and answer 'natural-language' questions posed in

standard English. In *Jeopardy!*, this includes puns, quips and hidden ambiguities. Similar systems could create more powerful search engines; for scientists, this might make it easier to trawl through research literature. See go.nature.com/u783dz for more.

PEOPLE



Science chief quits

Australia's chief scientist, Penny Sackett (pictured), has tendered her resignation halfway through her five-year term. She will step down on 4 March. Sackett, formerly director of astronomy and astrophysics research at the Australian National University in Canberra, cited "both personal and professional reasons" in her surprise announcement on 18 February. No further explanations had emerged as *Nature* went to press.

COMING UP

25 FEBRUARY

Elections in the Republic of Ireland are expected to oust the long-standing incumbent government, Fianna Fáil, which has heavily supported science for the past two decades.

28 FEB–1 MARCH

The Royal Society in London holds a meeting on how to reduce agricultural greenhouse-gas emissions.

go.nature.com/ffugs9

Scripps president

Biochemist Michael Marletta will be the next president of the Scripps Research Institute, succeeding chemist Richard Lerner who has held the position for the past 25 years. The institute, which is located in La Jolla, California, announced the change on 20 February. Currently based at the University of California, Berkeley, Marletta will move to Scripps in July and take the helm there from 1 January 2012.

Yamada steps down

Tachi Yamada is to retire after five years as president of the Global Health Programme at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington, the foundation announced on 14 February. Before joining the foundation, Yamada, who will step down in June, was head of research and development at London-based drug giant GlaxoSmithKline. One of his focuses at the foundation has been to enlist the support of pharmaceutical companies in developing drugs and vaccines for the developing world.

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TREND WATCH

The world's largest carbon-trading market is still reeling from a 19 January shut-down after €30 million (US\$41 million) in carbon credits was stolen from insecure accounts. The European Commission had to suspend immediate trading of allowances to emit carbon dioxide; only seven of the European market's 30 national registries have since opened up allowances for trading. Total traded volumes have not been dented, however, because most of the trading is based on the future price of allowances.

THEFT ON THE CARBON MARKET

Although overall trading volumes have been mostly unaffected by a suspension forced on Europe's carbon market, immediate (spot) trading only resumed on 4 February.

