

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## RESEARCH

### Mars find

NASA scientists reported on 12 March that the agency's Curiosity rover had found evidence that Mars could have supported life billions of years ago. Rock samples collected by Curiosity contained clay that probably formed in salt water that was of neutral pH. See [go.nature.com/ebzeey](http://go.nature.com/ebzeey) and page 292 for more.

### Methane success

Japan announced on 12 March that it had extracted methane from methane hydrate deposits about 300 metres under the seabed. Methane, the main constituent of natural gas, has previously been obtained from deposits under frozen tundra, but marine methane hydrate reservoirs are much larger. The successful effort by the deep-sea drilling vessel *Chikyu* marks the beginning of a two-week pilot project that will assess whether methane hydrates could become an economically feasible source of energy for Japan.

## BUSINESS

### GSK absorbs Sirtris

Sirtris Pharmaceuticals, which is pursuing drugs that combat diseases related to ageing, is to be absorbed by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a pharmaceutical firm headquartered in London. GSK acquired Sirtris, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2008 for US\$720 million, but allowed it to function as a distinct unit. On 12 March, however, GSK confirmed that the Cambridge site would be closed and the firm's lead drug candidate — a molecule believed to activate a protein called sirtuin 1 — folded into GSK's internal drug-development programme. See [go.nature.com/nhjtn](http://go.nature.com/nhjtn) for more.



CROSSRAIL

## Plague graves unearthed in London

A medieval plague pit has been unearthed during construction of a Central London rail project, archaeologists announced last week. The roughly 660-year-old mass-burial site in Charterhouse Square was established to cope with the arrival in London of the Black Death — the bubonic plague. Researchers

previously obtained the genome sequence of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for the plague, from human remains uncovered in a separate London burial pit (see *Nature* 478, 444–446; 2011). The latest find might bring further insight into the history and genetics of the disease.

### Seabed mining

UK Seabed Resources in London, a subsidiary of aerospace firm Lockheed Martin UK, has been granted permission to harvest metals from the sea floor at a site in the Pacific Ocean around 1,500 kilometres southwest of Mexico, the company announced on 14 March. See page 294 for more.

### AstraZeneca cuts

Drug giant AstraZeneca says that it will cut some 1,600 staff — of which 1,300 are researchers — in a restructuring plan that will see scientists concentrated at three major research sites: Cambridge, UK (which will become the firm's new global headquarters), Gaithersburg

in Maryland and Mölndal in Sweden. The company will close down all research at Alderley Park, UK. The plan, announced on 18 March, will cost US\$1.4 billion and will see the firm spend an additional \$500 million on the UK facility in Cambridge.

### Drug-data deceit

A UK researcher has for the first time been found guilty of manipulating safety data in experiments that supported clinical trials, the United Kingdom's drug-regulatory agency announced on 12 March. Working for the drug-development firm Aptuit in Edinburgh, Steven Eaton had since 2003 selectively reported figures that were later used to assess

the concentration of a drug in the blood. The manipulation meant that failed experiments were deemed to have worked, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency said. He will be sentenced in April for violating regulations set out in 1999 for good laboratory practice.

## POLICY

### Energy fund

US President Barack Obama on 15 March proposed the creation of an Energy Security Trust to fund research and development into low-carbon transportation alternatives. The trust would be supplied with US\$2 billion over 10 years by diverting a fraction of the federal royalties from oil and

gas leases, which are poised to grow in the coming years. See page 281 for more.

## EU budget battle

The level of funding for the European Union's Horizon 2020 research programme is uncertain again after the European Parliament voted against the proposed seven-year general budget on 13 March. Heads of state agreed at a meeting on 8 February on an austerity budget of €960 billion (US\$1.2 trillion) for 2014–20, which includes about €70 billion for Horizon 2020. The parliament, which last November suggested a research budget in excess of €100 billion, approved the spending ceiling but wanted unspent funds from one area to be spent on projects in another rather than returned to member states, as well as a review of the budget in 2014.

## Species protection

Multiple species of sharks and rays, including the oceanic whitetip shark (pictured), were granted enhanced protection at a meeting of parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in Bangkok last week. Various species of tropical hardwood trees were also added to appendix II of CITES, which places restrictions on their



trade. Delegates accepted proposals to increase the forensic analysis of seized ivory to fight poaching of African elephants, but rejected enhanced protections for polar bears. See [go.nature.com/r076uc](http://go.nature.com/r076uc) and page 281 for more.

## Drinks ban busted

A judge struck down a ban on the sale of large servings of sugary drinks in New York city on 11 March. Enacted by city mayor Michael Bloomberg's Board of Health, the ban would have gone into effect on 12 March. But after beverage makers, grocers' groups and restaurateurs sued, Justice Milton Tingling of the State Supreme Court ruled against it, calling the ban "arbitrary and capricious". Bloomberg said his administration would appeal against the ruling. The ban would have limited restaurants, cinemas and

kiosks to selling sugary drinks in portions of 16 US fluid ounces (473 millilitres) or less.

## Mars mission boost

Russia is partnering with the European Space Agency (ESA) on its ExoMars missions to the red planet. Roscosmos, Russia's space agency, will provide the launch vehicles and scientific instruments for both a planned orbiter in 2016 and a rover in 2018, as well as the rover's descent module and surface platform. The two agencies formalized the arrangement on 14 March. NASA, which in February 2012 backed out of its original plan to partner with ESA on ExoMars, will contribute telecommunications and other support.

### PEOPLE

## Generics limbo

The head of generic drugs at the US Food and Drug Administration, Gregory Geba, resigned on 15 March after just eight months in the post. He leaves the Office of Generic Drugs just as it is being reorganized and takes on extra responsibilities. Legislation last year allowed the office to start collecting fees on applications for the approval of generic drugs, in the hope that the added resources would allow it to shorten the time from application to approval.

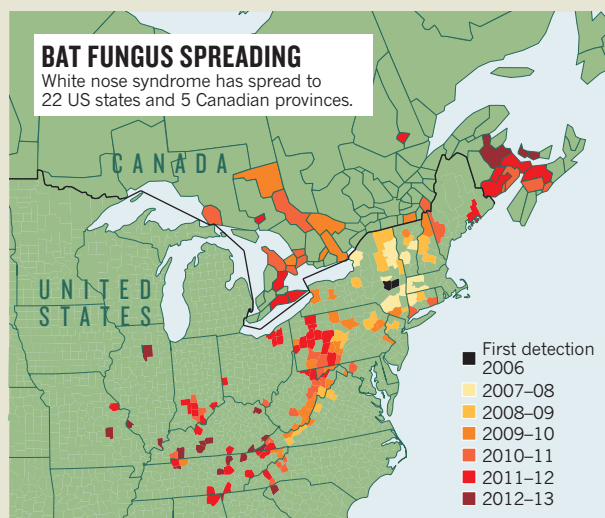
### FUNDING

## Spain fund freeze

The European Science Foundation (ESF) has temporarily frozen most funding for networking events planned beyond June to researchers from Spain's National Research Council (CSIC) and Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness until the agencies pay late dues. Spain has also cut payments to CERN, Europe's particle-physics laboratory near Geneva in Switzerland, and to the European Space Agency among others. The CSIC and ESF say that a resolution is forthcoming.

## TREND WATCH

White nose syndrome, a fungal disease of bats that is sweeping through North America, was this month documented in two new states: Georgia and South Carolina. The deadly infection, named for the powdery fungal growth on bats' muzzles, probably came from Europe, where the fungus (*Geomyces destructans*) is endemic. Since it first appeared in New York in 2006, the fungus has spread to 22 states and 5 Canadian provinces, and has killed an estimated 7 million bats.



### CORRECTION

The story 'Carbon spike' (*Nature* **495**, 146; 2013) wrongly stated that the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> has risen by 70% from pre-industrial levels. The global average of 395 p.p.m. represents a 41% increase.

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