

## US BUDGET WOES

*Spending battles loom in coming weeks*

The trap that the US Congress devised two years ago to force cuts in the federal deficit is about to spring. Steep budget cuts, known as sequestration, are scheduled to hit on 1 March. In January, a deadlocked Congress delayed the cuts at the last minute (see *Nature* **493**, 13; 2013), but this time, many Capitol Hill observers say that there is little appetite for compromise. “I have every reason to believe that sequestration is going to go into effect,” says Chris Hellman of the National Priorities Project, an organization in Northampton, Massachusetts, that promotes budget transparency.

Scientists are already feeling the effects of the impending cuts (see main story),

expected to amount to 5.1% at the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. But because all of the cuts for 2012 must be squeezed into the 7 months before the fiscal year ends on 30 September, they “will feel like closer to 10%”, says Barry Toiv, a spokesman for the Association of American Universities in Washington DC.

The delayed 2013 budget appropriations are unlikely to alleviate the pain. On 27 March, the stop-gap spending bill that has sustained government agencies at 2012 levels will expire. If cuts come on 1 March, science advocates may not have time to fight to restore funding in any 2013 budget agreement. “I just don’t see us being able to

get that back,” says Jennifer Zeitzer, director of legislative affairs for the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology in Bethesda, Maryland. “That just means we’ll be asking for more in 2014.”

The budgetary logjam has also delayed President Barack Obama’s budget request for 2014. The proposal was due in early February, but is now expected to debut in March. Experts say that it is difficult to predict what the president will propose for science agencies, or whether Congress will be receptive. “It’s going to be a big fight,” says Michael Lubell, director of public affairs for the American Physical Society in Washington DC. **Helen Shen**

Bloomington, would be hiring three field assistants and ordering mist nets, traps and colour bands for a census of dark-eyed junco songbirds that she has conducted in Virginia each spring since 1985. Ketterson says that continuity is crucial to understanding how long the

birds live, when they migrate and how their breeding dates are affected by climate change.

She applied for an NSF grant last August, and expected to learn of her award in November. But her programme officer told her that the application is on hold, with no chance of

funding before the NSF learns what its budget will be. She is approaching former field staff to see whether they can donate their time, and she is applying for emergency bridge funding from the university. “There are others, also waiting,” she says. “Delay has consequences.” ■

## FUNDING

# Europe scales back research plans

*Leaders propose 13% cut to commission’s proposals.*

BY ALISON ABBOTT

The ambitious vision for Europe’s next research programme dimmed last week when heads of the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) agreed to slash the overall budget for 2014–20, at the end of a long and acrimonious meeting. The deal scales back the budget proposed by the European Commission in November 2011 for its Horizon 2020 research programme by about 13%, to €69.24 billion (US\$108 billion), and means that the first year of the new programme will have a smaller budget than the last year of the previous one.

“The way it looks now, with all the arguments that were on the table in favour of promoting research in Europe, that decision is disappointing,” says Helga Nowotny, president of the European Research Council (ERC).

Europe’s leaders also reduced funding for specific scientific projects, including Galileo,

Europe’s satellite-navigation system, but they urged poor regions and countries to use more of their EU subsidies to pay for science.

A spokesman for the commission points out that even the reduced budget for Horizon 2020 marks a significant rise in research funding compared with the €55 billion for research during 2007–13.

The highly regarded ERC had been counting on a larger increase. Founded in 2007, it awards large grants on the basis of research excellence, and had hoped for a €13-billion slice of Horizon 2020 to help boost the current 12% success rate of proposals. The council did not detail how the cuts should be distributed among Horizon 2020’s research programmes.

The European Parliament has yet to endorse the council’s decision; politicians there will cast their votes some time in the next three months. Parliament had called for a mighty €100-billion budget for Horizon 2020 (see *Nature* **489**, 188–189; 2012).

Some prominent parliamentarians, including Christian Ehler, rapporteur for Horizon 2020, have vowed to fight for more. But observers say that behind-the-scenes negotiations between the commission, council and parliament over the past months suggest that the parliament is unlikely to get its own way.

The council’s proposal that more EU cohesion funds — historically used to promote the competitiveness of poor regions by improving infrastructure such as transport links — be used for research has precedent. Last year, Greece awarded €3.7 million in cohesion funds to molecular biologist George Kollias from the Biomedical Sciences Research Centre ‘Alexander Fleming’ near Athens. He will use them to equip and operate a Greek node of the Infrafrontier project, which aims to systematically phenotype, or characterize, mutant mice. “It’ll give all Greek scientists easier access to high-tech genetic tools,” he says.

The council specified exact budgets for three large scientific infrastructure programmes outside Horizon 2020. Its recommendations cut the commission’s budget for Galileo by 10% and for GMES, a system of Earth-observation satellites, by roughly one-third. The council did, however, allocate €2.7 billion to the experimental nuclear fusion reactor ITER, which the commission had proposed not funding.

“But discussions are not yet over,” cautions Nowotny. “We all have to wait to see the final figures and agreement.” ■ **SEE EDITORIAL P.147**