**Log-jam in agency confirmations**

**Political squabbles leave US science agencies without heads.**

BY LAUREN MORELLO

U.S. Senate Republicans have lots of questions for Gina McCarthy, President Barack Obama’s nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) — 1,038 of them, to be exact. Many target alleged lapses in the EPA’s policies regarding transparency and information access, but they also reflect a more general distrust of the agency that regulates greenhouse-gas emissions, sets water-pollution standards and monitors air quality.

McCarthy, currently the EPA’s assistant administrator in charge of air and radiation, has had plenty of time to ponder the lawmakers’ queries since her nomination on 7 March. She has already waited weeks longer for confirmation by the Senate than any would-be chief in the EPA’s 43-year history (see ‘Stalling tactics’). Obama’s new energy department chief in the EPA’s 43-year history (see ‘Stall tactics’). Obama’s new energy department chief in the EPA’s 43-year history (see ‘Stall tactics’).

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The flooded Red River isolated houses in North Dakota in 2011. Budget cuts now endanger monitoring.

**POLICY**

US budget cuts hit Earth monitoring

**BY ALEXANDRA WITZE**

Two kilometres south of the US–Canadian border, in Pembina, North Dakota, a stream gauge measures the height of the water surging down the Red River. The instrument, one of about 8,000 maintained by the US Geological Survey (USGS), is a sentinel for communities along the river that experienced devastating floods in 2009, 2010 and 2011. Yet this spring, the USGS announced plans to shut down the Pembina stream gauge — a casualty of the sweeping federal budget cuts known as sequestration.

Implemented on 1 March, sequestration slashes about 5% from the budget of every federal agency and programme until the end of the fiscal year on 30 September, with further cuts expected until the end of 2021 unless Congress intervenes. Scientists in fields from biology to astronomy are bracing themselves for an era of smaller and fewer research grants, which will begin within months (see *Nature* **494**, 158–159; 2013). But the cuts are already hampering Earth-monitoring projects, including stream gauges and snowpack measurements, which require a constant influx of funds to keep data flowing.

Monitoring equipment frequently breaks and must be repaired or replaced, usually during the short period of summer fieldwork. That often requires expensive journeys to remote sites by helicopter or other means. Such is the case for surveys of the United States’ western snowpack, a crucial source of water in summer for many states. Continuing a tradition that began in 1906, when a University of Nevada researcher measured snow depth along a transect in the Sierra Nevada mountains, the US Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service conducts more than 1,100 manual ‘snow courses’ once a month throughout winter and spring. In 1980 it also began operating automated snow telemetry (SNOTEL) sites, and it now has around 860 spread over 13 western states. Survey data are used to produce water-supply forecasts and to analyse changes in the snowpack over time.

But in January, the snow survey announced that it would eliminate 39 snow courses in Montana. The programme was already suffering from reduced funding: it received US$9.3 million in fiscal year 2012, about 15% less than the year before. Congress has not yet finalized the 2013 budget, but the survey is probably facing another 7.5% cut this year when sequestration is taken into account, says Michael Strobel, director of the National Water and Climate Center in Portland, Oregon.

More snow courses may be at risk. “We’re trying to prioritize sites that have...”

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