11 September deadline for applications to the drug-discovery project. The review process will be similarly speedy, taking between ten days and a fortnight. Distribution of funds will start in October.

Many scientists are angry at being hurried, although they shy away from publicly criticizing the project while their applications are under review. One molecular biologist in Guangzhou called the last-minute rush "ridiculous", saying it would reduce the quality of proposals. Noting that some proposals had already been rejected without any explanation, he said the review is "like a black hole".

Although the application forms claim the procedure will include "public announcement, free application, expert review [and] merit-based selection", some wonder whether the speedy application and evaluation procedures mean the winners have already been picked. "It only benefits the people who knew about it long before everyone else," says the head of a Shanghai biotech company. Even those not critical of the project say the money will go to the usual suspects. Others say the ministry should have taken more time explaining the projects and their goals to those not in the inner circle.

A senior biologist in Beijing criticizes the focus on hepatitis B, given that a vaccine already exists. He says that he wonders whether the money might be more effective if it were split between vaccination programmes and other research programmes. "These megaprojects are covers for dividing up funds, not driven by real goals," he says.

There is also concern about whether the funding will be spread too thinly. "It will help everyone a little bit, but not have a big impact on new drug development," says a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of Materia Medica. Yip is more positive about the infectious-disease money. "Even if they spread it around," he says, "there is still a substantial amount."

Some scientists contacted by *Nature* said they could easily repackage their existing research for the megaprojects. Others brush aside criticisms, noting that those familiar with the Chinese funding system should have been ready. Results of the selection process are expected later this month. ■

David Cyranoski

including Beijing, Mumbai, New York and Tokyo. "We are not starting from a blank page," says Baklanov. The comprehensive datasets will be used to build regional models, which will be interfaced with less detailed data — mainly global-scale models and satellite data of both air pollution and climate.

To complete the picture, the consortium will model four European metropolitan areas: Paris, London, Germany's Rhine-Ruhr region and the Po valley in Italy. Paris will be studied in the most detail, with an aircraft and ground field campaign to plug gaps in existing air-pollution data — particularly in the chemical speciation and evolution of aerosols, as well as gas-aerosol interactions. It will also benefit from the results of a second EU-led megacity project, CityZen, which will focus on determining the distribution and changes in air pollution over the past decade in four hotspots. The result, says Baklanov, will not only refine models and maps, but also tools to help urban planners mitigate pollution.

Studying many megacities together is crucial to building better regional models, says Jeffrey Gaffney, an atmospheric chemist at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, who is not involved in the project. Moreover, he says, as cities worldwide differ in how they deal with pollution, studying many cities will itself provide benchmarks and better predictions of what works best in improving urban management of emissions.

"The collaborative approach in MEGAPOLI is a good one," he notes. "By combining efforts, the sum of the instrumentation, expertise and quality of the data is greater than any one investigator could ever hope to mount." ■

Declan Butler

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LAB POLITICS

GARRISON PHOTOGRAPHY

In the second of our election-themed podcasts available online, *Nature* looks at where US biomedical research might head after November's presidential election. Excerpts from our panel discussion:

"How are we going to structure our biomedical research enterprise, our graduate training and our undergraduate training for the next generation of scientists? Republicans and Democrats should be able to pull in the same direction on these issues."
Thomas Cech, president, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland

"The prohibition on federal funding of most human embryonic stem-cell research has been an enormous wet blanket on the whole research enterprise in this area."
Jonathan Moreno, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

"[Stem-cell research] has become so politicized, and that has encouraged some scientists to become very exuberant about the potential. Whereas if it hadn't become so politicized, I think they would be a bit more sceptical."
Thomas Cech

"We must preserve the synergy that we have between the public and the private sectors, if we intend to maintain our competitive lead in science and technology."
Gail Cassell, vice-president for scientific affairs, Eli Lilly, Indianapolis, Indiana

"It might even be time for there to be a life scientist as the science adviser to the president, which would be a departure."
Jonathan Moreno

To hear the full discussion, chaired by our columnist David Goldston, visit www.nature.com/nature/podcast. Next week's instalment: innovation policy.