

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## EVENTS

### Polio in Somalia

Somalia has recorded its first case of wild poliovirus since March 2007, the World Health Organization said on 11 May. A 32-month-old girl living near Mogadishu has been paralysed by the virus. There have been no polio immunizations in some parts of the country since 2009. As *Nature* went to press, genetic testing was under way to determine the virus's origin. The only other countries that have recorded wild poliovirus cases in 2013 are Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria, the three countries that have never managed to interrupt its transmission. See [go.nature.com/x43baq](http://go.nature.com/x43baq) for more.

## POLICY

### Online data tool

US President Barack Obama on 9 May unveiled a public tool for online searches and analysis of information from more than 9,000 government data sets on health, climate science and the environment. Such data could help scientists to link extreme weather events with common illnesses or infectious diseases, for example. The project will be coordinated across six government agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the US Geological Survey. Its launch accompanied the announcement of a policy that would make all government-generated data more accessible by computer.

### Radiation warnings

Lawmakers in San Francisco, California, agreed on 7 May to strike down an ordinance that required retailers to warn consumers about allegedly dangerous radiation from mobile



LAURA LEON/POLARIS/EYEVINE

## Endangered ecosystems get listed

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on 8 May updated the criteria for its Red List of Ecosystems (D. A. Keith *et al.* *PLoS ONE* 8, e62111; 2013). Based on its successful Red List of Threatened Species, which assesses risk of extinction, the new list ranks ecosystems using factors such as rate of shrinkage, disruption to wildlife and risk

of ecosystem collapse. The paper highlights the Aral Sea in central Asia as an example of a collapsed ecosystem. River-diversion projects have caused the body of water, once the fourth-largest lake in the world, to lose about 90% of its volume in the past 50 years, stranding fishing boats (pictured) and depleting native wildlife.

phones. Implementation of the 2011 city law — the first of its kind in the United States — had been blocked by legal challenges from a communications-industry group. City leaders voted to settle with the group by revoking the law. In exchange, the industry association agreed to waive its claim to roughly US\$500,000 in legal fees that it might have collected in a court victory.

### Research revamp

Canada is changing the focus of its National Research Council (NRC) from broad-ranging, independent science to commercial research directed by private industry. The overhaul of the 97-year-old government agency, revealed on 7 May, is aimed

at spurring technology innovation and economic growth. The NRC institutes — budgeted at Can\$900 million (US\$889 million) in 2013 — will be reorganized into 12 business units focused on 5 areas of research: security, manufacturing, infrastructure, health costs, and natural resources and the environment.

## RESEARCH

### Neuroscience goal

Researchers met for the first time to begin planning the US National Science Foundation's part in the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies initiative — an ambitious bid to understand the brain's signals by simultaneously recording from unprecedented numbers

of neurons. More than 150 scientists from such fields as neuroscience, engineering and computer science attended the conference in Arlington, Virginia, which ended on 7 May. Also present were scientists representing the US National Institutes of Health — one of the initiative's two other government-agency partners. See [go.nature.com/xgswra](http://go.nature.com/xgswra) for more.

## FACILITIES

### Campus upset

University College London (UCL) announced on 7 May that it has abandoned plans to build a £1-billion (US\$1.54-billion) campus on a site in east London that is currently a residential estate. The university had been in

talks with the London Borough of Newham to develop teaching and research facilities on the estate, some 9 kilometres from UCL's base in central London. UCL says that it could not reach agreement with local authorities over the redevelopment, but insists that it is committed to establishing quarters in the area.

SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY/GETTY IMAGES



and other environmental issues. The senators, from the Committee on Environment and Public Works, suggest that they will vote once the EPA has responded to their questions over the proposed regulations. Senate Democrats have rescheduled the vote for 16 May.

**Hawking row**

Physicist Stephen Hawking of the University of Cambridge, UK, has pulled out of a high-profile conference in Israel. Hawking said his decision, which became public last week, was made to “respect the boycott” of Israel over its actions in the occupied Palestinian territories. His move has rekindled fierce debate among proponents and opponents of the boycott. Hawking’s withdrawal has drawn fire from both the conference organizers and the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities in Jerusalem (see page 299 for more).

**COMING UP**

**18–21 MAY**  
The American Society for Microbiology holds its annual general meeting in Denver, Colorado, with scientific discussions including threats from the avian influenza viruses H7N9 and H5N1.  
[gm.asm.org](http://gm.asm.org)

**21–23 MAY**  
The Pasteur Institute in Paris hosts an international symposium on HIV research, marking 30 years since the first reports of a retrovirus associated with AIDS.  
[www.30yearshiv.org](http://www.30yearshiv.org)

**FUNDING**

**NIH budget blues**

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced on 8 May a final 2013 budget of US\$29.15 billion, down from \$30.7 billion in 2012. The revised number reflects the effect of a government spending cut called the sequester, which was implemented in March. As a result, the agency said that it will fund 34,902 research grants — 3.7% fewer than in 2012. Grant recipients awaiting instalments on grants won in previous years will see these funded “at levels below those indicated on the Notice of Award”, the agency said.

**Smith under fire**

US congressman Lamar Smith (Republican, Texas) is facing mounting opposition to draft legislation that would alter the way research is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Under the proposal drafted by Smith (pictured),

who leads the House science committee, all NSF-funded research would be required to expressly benefit national interests and to undergo additional certification after peer review. In two letters sent to Smith on 8 May, 24 scientific leaders, including former NSF directors and assistant directors, and former chairmen of the National Science Board, requested that Smith retract the legislation, saying that it would hinder scientific progress.

**PEOPLE**

**Stalled nominee**

Eight Republican senators boycotted a 9 May vote on the nomination of Gina McCarthy as administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), effectively blocking the process. McCarthy would oversee US efforts to implement regulations targeting global warming

**BUSINESS**

**Shale-gas exit**

Two energy firms — Talisman Energy, headquartered in Calgary, Canada, and Marathon Oil, based in Houston, Texas — decided last week to cease shale-gas exploration activities in Poland. The pull-out raises further questions about Poland’s shale-gas production,

which is yet to begin. In a 2011 review, the US Energy Information Administration estimated that Poland had 5.3 trillion cubic metres of shale gas, but a 2012 study by the Polish Geological Institute revised this figure to less than 800 billion cubic metres.

**Transgene patents**

The US Supreme Court ruled on 13 May that a farmer had violated intellectual-property laws by planting genetically modified soya beans without buying the goods from the crop’s patent-holder, agricultural technology giant Monsanto, based in St Louis, Missouri. Indiana farmer Vernon Bowman argued that Monsanto’s patents did not apply to seeds he purchased from a grain elevator (storage tower) that contained a mixture of surplus crops, including Monsanto’s herbicide-resistant soya beans. The court disagreed, saying that US patent law “provides no haven” for propagating crops from such seeds. See [go.nature.com/ui1764](http://go.nature.com/ui1764) for more.

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**TREND WATCH**

An online media surveillance tool can track concerns and rumours about vaccines as they occur in real time. The system, described in a 13 May paper (H. J. Larson *et al. Lancet Infect. Dis.* <http://doi.org/mhm>; 2013), picks up positive and negative sentiments, both worldwide (see chart) and for particular events in specific countries. Heidi Larson of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine hopes that real-time monitoring will help health officials to know where to focus if trust in vaccines falls.

**VACCINES GET A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE**

Negative reports about vaccines were outweighed about 2:1 by positive or neutral sentiments during 2011 and 2012.

