

► In March 2016, Poland's environment minister, Jan Szyszko, who is also a forester and entomologist, amended forest-management rules to permit a three-fold increase in timber harvesting from Białowieża. His ministry argues that dead wood needs to be removed to combat an infestation of the European spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*) in the forest's Norway spruce (*Picea abies*).

But scientists argued against those plans. "Beetle pests are natural processes from which a forest can regenerate without intervention," says Rafał Kowalczyk, director of the Polish Academy of Sciences' Mammal Research Institute in the village of Białowieża. "The current outbreak is severe, but absolutely not dangerous." On 29 April, the 150 participants of an international forest conference in Neuschönau, Germany, wrote a letter to Szyszko, arguing that natural disturbances such as wildfires and insect outbreaks are an inherent part of

forest ecosystems. Meanwhile, environmental protesters have taken more extreme action, including chaining themselves to logging machines in protest. Kowalczyk says — as do other opponents of the logging policy — that he suspects the amended forest-management plan is a concession to commercial interests, although the environment ministry says that there are no commercial incentives at play.

COURT WARNINGS

In June 2016, the European Commission sent a formal notification to Poland's government that the logging amendments risked infringing on EU laws protecting birds and habitats, and urging it to comply. In April this year, it sent a final warning. Poland replied, in a letter not made public. But Kowalczyk thinks it is likely that the country restated its stance that active forest management is necessary to combat the beetle pest, and that the long-term impact of

increased logging on forest health would be closely monitored. Regardless, the reply did not satisfy the commission.

It's now up to the ECJ, the final arbiter in EU legal matters, to consider a ban. No country has refused to comply when the ECJ has ordered interim bans to prevent immediate harm, Szafraniuk says. If a ban were ordered and Poland did not obey, the commission could impose daily fines — perhaps as large as hundreds of thousands of euros — or withdraw EU funds.

"We hope that the Court of Justice will impose the ban on logging, as a matter of urgency, before its summer break on 21 July," says Szafraniuk. If it does not, any decision on an interim ban will have to wait until September when the ECJ resumes its work. ■

1. Ruczyński, I., Zahorowicz, P., Borowik, T. & Hałat, Z. *Mamm. Res.* **62**, 65–73 (2017).
2. Schmidt, K., Davoli, F., Kowalczyk, R. & Randi, E. *Integr. Zoology* **11**, 334–349 (2016).

BUDGET

US lawmakers seek extra \$1.1 billion for the NIH

Panel rejects plan to cut health-research agency's 'indirect cost' payments to institutions.

BY LAUREN MORELLO

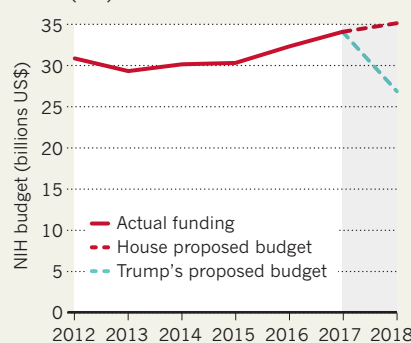
The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) would see its budget rise by US\$1.1 billion in 2018, to \$35.2 billion, under a spending proposal released on 12 July by lawmakers in the House of Representatives.

The legislation explicitly rejects a plan by the administration of President Donald Trump to cut the NIH's budget by 18% in 2018 (see 'Funding boost'). The president's proposal would achieve that largely by reducing how much the agency pays to reimburse its grant recipients' institutions for "indirect costs" — expenses such as administration and facilities maintenance. Instead, the House bill includes a provision that directs the NIH to compensate institutions for those expenses, although the materials released so far do not include full details of the requirements. On 13 July, the House spending subcommittee that oversees the NIH voted to advance the legislation to consideration by the full appropriations committee.

The NIH spent \$6.3 billion of its \$30.4-billion budget for 2015 on indirect-cost payments. It has long negotiated with individual research institutions to set the rate at which they are reimbursed for overhead

FUNDING BOOST

Lawmakers in the US House of Representatives have rejected President Donald Trump's 2018 budget proposal for the National Institutes of Health (NIH).



costs. These payments are not deducted from the amount awarded to specific researchers, but are paid separately as a percentage of the grant amount.

A *Nature* investigation in 2014 found that indirect-cost rates vary from 20% to 85% at universities, with an even wider range for hospitals and non-profit institutions. The White House plan had sought to set a uniform rate for these payments, arguing that the change would

help to reduce "the risk for fraud and abuse".

The House bill's overall funding for the NIH and its treatment of indirect costs is encouraging, especially in contrast to the Trump proposal, says Benjamin Corb, director of public affairs at the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in Rockville, Maryland. "We are appreciative that the committee recognizes the important role universities play in the research enterprise," he says.

The House legislation also includes increased funding for several high-profile projects in which the NIH is involved. The agency's All of Us research programme, an ambitious study of health records and genomic information from one million people in the United States, would receive \$400 million, an \$80-million boost from the 2017 level. And the BRAIN Initiative (Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies) would receive \$336 million, an increase of \$76 million.

The agency's research programmes on Alzheimer's disease would get an extra \$400 million above the 2017 level, raising their total funding to \$1.8 billion. However, the budget for the Cancer Moonshot, which seeks to accelerate progress towards cures, would hold steady at \$300 million. ■

SOURCE: NIH