

► salary only if they already hold a teaching post. Researchers say this will mainly affect young scientists who haven't yet had the time or experience to get a university teaching post. An online petition to change this proposal has been signed by more than 1,000 people so far.

Evolutionary biologist Biljana Stojković is among those who think that such changes will do more harm than good. "As far as I know, this will be a unique situation in the whole world — universities without science," says Stojković, who works at the University of Belgrade. "At least 1,500 young scientists

will lose their positions," she says.

Popović says that researchers will not lose their jobs as a result of the reforms. "Serbia has roughly half the number of researchers per capita as compared to [countries in] the EU," he says. "The country is making all possible efforts to keep all existing researchers and attract researchers from abroad, particularly from the diaspora."

Popović adds that the laws have also been designed to allow a wider set of stakeholders to invest in science: the government's long-term goal is for the private sector to provide

two-thirds of overall research funding.

But Ivan Belča, a physicist at the University of Belgrade, says that given Serbia's weak economy, it is unlikely that the private sector will be able to increase investment in the near future.

And few trust the government's promises of putting in more public money — something that Popović says his ministry is "painfully aware of". "Losing trust was a 20-year-long process, during which time many governments changed," says Popović. "It is our intention to regain the trust by establishing new institutions and legislation." ■

## BIOLOGY

# US ecology project in turmoil

*Sudden leadership changes at the National Ecological Observatory Network prompt top scientist's resignation.*

BY SARA REARDON

An ecological observatory funded by the US National Science Foundation (NSF) is in turmoil after a top leader quit and its advisory board was dissolved.

On 4 January, the contractor that manages the US\$434-million National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON) dismissed two long-time project managers. NEON's scientific director, Sharon Collinge, who says she was not consulted about the moves, resigned in protest on 8 January. Later that day,

the contractor disbanded the organization's scientific advisory board.

In an e-mail to the advisory board — seen by *Nature* — Battelle, the non-profit contractor in Columbus, Ohio, that runs NEON, said that its actions were driven by the "changing needs of the research community".

NEON has almost finished constructing a web of more than 80 ecological observation sites across the United States, and is beginning to produce data for ecologists to analyse. "Given the maturation of the NEON project, it is appropriate to re-examine the charter of our

external advisory group," said Battelle's chief scientist, Michael Kuhlman.

The turmoil is the latest in a long line of woes for NEON, which launched in 2000 and has faced ballooning budgets and allegations of mismanagement by its previous operator. Battelle took over NEON's operations in 2016 and, in 2018, appointed Collinge, an environmental scientist at the University of Colorado Boulder, as the network's observatory director and chief scientist. The non-profit also created the 20-member Science, Technology & Education Advisory Committee (STEAC).

STEAC members credit Battelle with saving NEON, and construction of its observatories is now on schedule. But several see the dismissals and cancellation of the board as a breach of trust with the scientists who hope to use NEON data. "That's burning bridges, which you just can't afford to do in a small community," says Ankur Desai, an atmospheric scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

"I understand fully that this is very difficult and emotional for some people," says Battelle spokesperson Patrick Jarvis. "Our goal remains to develop amazing data products and help the research community understand what's going on at the broadest ecological level." The changes were driven by the need to improve the programme's efficiency, he adds.

Collinge, who took temporary leave from her faculty position in February 2018 to manage NEON, says that she felt blindsided when Battelle dismissed two senior NEON managers: Wendy Gram, an ecologist who served as NEON's education director, and Richard Leonard, its vice-president for research infrastructure. Collinge says that Battelle acted without her knowledge or consent. Battelle told *Nature* that it is the sole decision-maker on NEON personnel issues.

After Collinge resigned, Kuhlman disbanded the programme's board of advisers. He has appointed Eugene Kelly, a soil researcher at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, as temporary chief scientist while the company looks for a permanent NEON science chief.

Jarvis says that Battelle will appoint a new advisory council "in the very near future", after Kelly begins work and Battelle can consult with the NSF. ■



NEON operates this instrument-laden tower in Alaska, which gathers data on the surrounding taiga.

CHRIS MCKAY, BATTLE MEMORIAL INST.