Long-haul balloon makes more of a splash than planned

Washington It should have ushered in a new generation of ballooning. But after waiting almost two months for favourable weather at its launch site in central Australia, NASA's new Ultra Long Duration Balloon — designed to fly for about three months at a time — returned to Earth just 12 hours after its launch on 16 March.

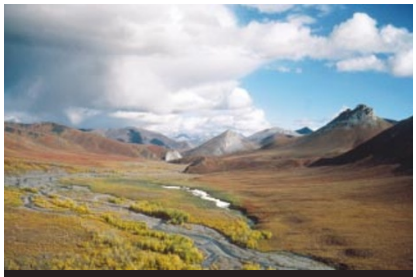
The gigantic pumpkin-shaped balloon never inflated evenly, and it eventually lost pressure after taking off, says programme manager Steve Smith of NASA's Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia. After flight directors decided to bring it down, the balloon landed in a shallow pond. "It's the only body of water in 500 miles," joked Smith.

The scientific payload, designed to measure ultraviolet radiation from the Earth's atmosphere, appeared to be undamaged. But the balloon programme, which aims to place equipment almost completely above the atmosphere during 100-day flights (see *Nature* **421,** 308–309; 2003), is on hold while engineers fix the problem. An agreement to fly over Russian territory on flights across the Northern Hemisphere has also been delayed.

US Senate upholds ban on oil drilling in wildlife refuge

Washington US environmental groups celebrated victory last week in the fight over oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

An amendment to a Senate budget bill, passed by 52 votes to 48 on 19 March, has ended current plans for oil exploration in the refuge. President George W. Bush's administration had pushed for drilling to be authorized, arguing that opening up new domestic oil supplies would reduce the United States' dependence on foreign sources. But environmentalists had campaigned against drilling in the refuge, on the grounds that this would damage the region's fragile ecosystem (see *Nature* 422, 103; 2003).



US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE/GETTY IMAGES

Cold comfort: no oil from Alaska's Arctic refuge.

Stargazer sees red

Sydney A British astronomer faces deportation from Australia after emblazoning Sydney Opera House with an anti-war slogan.

Armed with red paint and rollers, Will Saunders of the Anglo-Australian Observatory in Sydney and Australian environmentalist David Burgess painted "No war" on the tallest crest of the iconic building in protest over Australia's involvement in the Iraq conflict. Both were arrested upon their descent and charged with malicious damage.

Saunders was granted bail, but while telling reporters that he loves his adopted country and would help to clear up the graffiti, he was re-arrested at the behest of the Australian Immigration Department. He now faces the possibility of being sent back to Britain if his work visa is revoked.

PA

A cosmologist whose research concerns the large-scale structure of the Universe, Saunders has been working on a three-year visa at the observatory, an international facility that operates two optical telescopes.

"We're thrilled that a bipartisan group of senators stood up to protect this spectacular landscape," says Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, a Washington-based environmental group.

The Bush administration could still attempt to pursue drilling plans, although it may struggle to win support after last week's vote.

'Low risk' of infection from smuggled meat

London About 100 kilograms of meat infected with foot-and-mouth disease are illegally brought into Britain every year, according to a new risk assessment.

The study, produced by the government's Veterinary Laboratories Agency and independent risk-assessment consultants SafetyCraft, says that most meat is brought in by individuals for personal use. The authors estimate that the chances of the imports reaching farms are small and would result in one farm animal, on average, becoming infected every 130 years.

Four million animals were culled to contain the last foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001, and the government was due to publish an action plan along with the assessment on 25 March. The new measures include increasing the number of detector dogs working with customs, and continued plans for intelligence-gathering and further risk assessments.

www.defra.gov.uk

Ex-professor's gift boosts Californian university's funds

San Diego A former engineering professor at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), has given his old employers a donation of $110 million.

Irwin Jacobs, now chief executive of Qualcomm, a communications technology company based in San Diego, announced the donation to the university's engineering school on 15 March. Jacobs and his wife Joan have already given $23.4 million to UCSD, which named its engineering school after them. The gift includes $10 million for faculty recruitment over the next five years, with the remainder being used to increase the engineering school's funding for staff, teaching and research support.

The donation ushers in the public phase of a UCSD campaign to raise $1 billion for research, teaching and endowed chairs. This latest gift pushes the total pledged so far to $445 million, university officials say.

Hunts for neutrinos and hominids pay off

Washington Palaeontologist Michel Brunet and astrophysicist John Bahcall each found themselves $1 million better off last week after scooping Dan David Prizes.

Brunet, of the University of Poitiers in France, has spent decades exploring fossils unearthed in Asia and Africa. He was the subject of worldwide media attention last summer when he and his team published details of a six- to seven-million-year-old fossil skull believed to come from the earliest known hominid (see M. Brunet *et al. Nature* **418,** 145–151; 2002).

His co-winner Bahcall, from the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University in New Jersey, has studied subjects including stellar evolution and dark matter, but is best known for his work on solar neutrinos. He helped to develop a solar-neutrino detector in the 1960s and worked on models that accounted for the apparent shortfall in neutrinos detected by these devices.

The prizes were set up by Dan David, chairman of photo-booth operators Photo-Me International. The winners are judged to have made an outstanding "scientific, technological, cultural or social impact on our world".

www.dandavidprize.com