

Pfizer to get rights to drugs discovered at Scripps

Drug giant Pfizer will pay US\$100 million over the next five years for first rights to develop drugs from discoveries at the non-profit Scripps Research Institute.

The deal replaces an expiring one between the Scripps facility in La Jolla, California, and Swiss company Novartis. Critics have argued in the past that consumers and government insurance programmes end up paying high prices for drugs generated by taxpayer-funded research. Advocates say the pacts are an efficient way of bringing therapies to market.

The US National Institutes of Health, which funds about three-quarters of Scripps' research at a cost of \$230 million a year, must still approve the new pact. Pfizer would be able to develop drugs based on nearly half of Scripps' discoveries at its California and Florida labs.

GM potato rewrites rules for making paper

The European Union (EU) is considering ending its eight-year effective moratorium on the approval of live genetically modified crops. But on 4 December, an EU panel of experts could not agree on whether to authorize a potato strain that is tailor-made for the paper industry.

The decision will now pass to EU ministers, probably next spring. If approved, the strain, called Amflora, will be the first new commercial transgenic crop to be approved for planting in Europe since 1998. By contrast with conventional potatoes — which produce two forms of starch, amylopectin and amylose — the transgenic version produces only amylopectin, which is more useful for making paper and adhesives. The potatoes would not be grown for eating.



The starch in these potatoes makes them good to eat, but that in a new GM strain will have other uses.

Conservation areas in Brazil set to grow

Brazil has just become a lot more protected. Nine chunks of land totalling the size of Florida have been set aside for conservation.

The government of the state of Pará, working with international conservation groups, announced the new reserves on 4 December. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, based in San Francisco, California, is helping to foot the total cost.

The 16.4 million hectares set aside include the world's largest tropical forest reserve. This is a jungle landscape the size of Denmark, home to endangered species such as the Pebas stubfoot toad (*Atelopus spumarius*; pictured). This region will be open only to research and conservation activities, but other regions will be allocated for sustainable-use projects.



E. BERNARDI/CI-BRASIL

Amflora is made by the German chemical company BASF. In a separate development, environmental groups have been protesting against the UK government's decision to approve experimental planting of a food potato engineered by BASF to resist blight. That crop is already in field trials in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands.

Europe feels a record autumn heat

Been feeling warm recently? Europe has had the hottest autumn in the past 500 years, a Swiss climate historian argues.

Preliminary analysis suggests that mean temperatures over continental Europe have been nearly 2 °C higher than the long-term average for the period from September to November. This autumn was even 1 °C warmer than the record-warm autumns of 1772, 1938 and 2000, says Elena Xoplaki of the University of Bern, who led the unpublished study.

"Exceptionally warm autumns in one region or another wouldn't be so telling," says Jürg Luterbacher, a climatologist at the University of Bern. "But the signal is consistent over the whole European land mass, from Iceland to Greece."

Autumn climate trends have been generally less well investigated than summer, winter and spring trends.

Agricultural priorities adapt to climate change

Faced with the prospect of climate change devastating crops worldwide, agricultural researchers have tweaked their research agenda.

At its annual general meeting in Washington DC this week, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research — an international alliance of

food-crop centres — released several dire predictions for the future. For example, heat and drought are expected to shrink the wheat-growing area of India by half by 2050. Elsewhere, though, climate change would open new areas for crops: in North America, for instance, wheat could be grown at latitudes nearly up to the Arctic Circle.

But most of the world's poor live in the tropics, where food-growing capacity will be hardest hit. So the centres have laid out new research priorities, which include breeding improved crops to better tolerate salt, drought, flooding and rising temperatures, and helping farmers manage their resources more effectively.

Conflicts of interest found on hospital review boards

Even the people who serve on institutional review boards for hospitals often have financial ties to industry, a study shows.

Of 893 board members surveyed, just over a third reported having at least one such relationship. And 15% said that, within the past year, an issue had come before their board that involved either a company in which they had a financial relationship or a competitor of such a company. Of those, 23% said they never disclosed such potential conflicts of interest to a board official.

The survey, led by Eric Campbell of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, appeared last week in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (E. G. Campbell *et al.* *N. Engl. J. Med.* 355, 2321–2329; 2006).

In a related study published in the same issue, a second team found that more than 90% of patients in US cancer trials said they did not worry about any possible financial relationship between industry and the researchers conducting the trials (L. A. Hampson *et al.* *N. Engl. J. Med.* 355, 2330–2337; 2006).