

Crop biodiversity project receives seed money

Funding has been secured for a major biodiversity project that could help safeguard seeds and genetic data for up to 165,000 varieties of 21 food crops.

The project, carried out by the Global Crop Diversity Trust and the United Nations Foundation, will replenish stores of seeds in poorly maintained seed banks throughout the world and ensure that back-up stocks are established. It will also create a database that gives plant breeders access to the genetic blueprints underlying the different strains.

Designed to ensure that plant breeders retain as much flexibility as possible in creating improved crop strains, the project will be paid for by a \$30-million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and \$7.5 million from the government of Norway.

India puts Italian AGILE satellite into orbit

Italy's satellite AGILE was launched by India's PSLV rocket on 23 April, in India's first commercial launch solely for a foreign spacecraft.

AGILE, which had been delayed for two years as Italy's space leaders debated the launch, will provide the first measurements of high-energy gamma rays since NASA's Compton Gamma-Ray Observatory fell back to Earth in 2000. A NASA programme called GLAST will make similar measurements following its launch later this year.

The PSLV is due to launch India's first spacecraft mission to the Moon, Chandrayaan-1, in 2008.



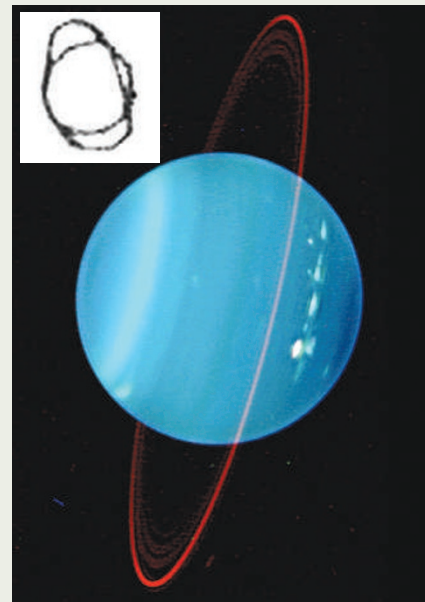
AGILE manoeuvre: India's PSLV rocket takes off.

M. LAKSHMAN/AP

Cassini offers solution to the riddle of the rings

Fresh light has been shed on why William Herschel was able to sketch the rings around Uranus in the late eighteenth century (inset). Other astronomers were unable to confirm his sighting with more powerful telescopes until the Keck telescope on Hawaii confirmed the rings' existence in 1977 (right).

Stuart Eves of Surrey Satellite Technology, a UK satellite company, told the Royal Astronomical Society's National Astronomy Meeting in Preston that the Cassini mission has shown that Saturn's rings are darkening and expanding. If the same phenomenon occurred around Uranus, he says, that would explain why its rings have become progressively harder to see. Herschel's sketch shows the rings in the right orientation, and his description that they are reddish has also been confirmed.



L. SKROMOVSKI/UNIV. WISCONSIN-MADISON/W. M. KECK OBSERV.

Contaminated-blood inquiry begins in Britain

An independent public inquiry has started in Manchester, UK, into how thousands of haemophiliacs were infected with HIV and hepatitis C in the 1970s and 1980s by being given contaminated blood products. It follows related scandals in France, Japan, Germany and the United States, where similar proportions of haemophiliacs were infected.

The inquiry, led by Labour peer Peter Archer, will examine the timetable of decisions to introduce heat-inactivated clotting factors and products from the United States that were known to be high-risk because of the US practice of paying donors. The focus of HIV infection will be the narrow window between the discovery of the virus as the cause of AIDS in 1983 and the introduction of safe blood products in 1985. Haemophiliacs have long demanded an inquiry, which could open the way for compensation.

Germany relaxes rules on postdoc contracts

A controversial rule disallowing scientists in Germany from working on short-term contracts for longer than 12 years — or 15 years in the case of clinical research — has been retracted.

The rule was introduced in 2001 as part of a package of measures intended to improve the lot of young German researchers by limiting the duration of insecure postdoc work (see *Nature* 415, 257–258; 2002). But it was criticized from the beginning for introducing unnecessary restrictions — and for discriminating against women, who are

likely to take time off to start a family during their 20s and 30s.

A replacement law that allows grant money to be used to pay postdoctoral researchers without time restriction came into force last week.

Canada launches open-access medical journal

An open-access medical journal has been set up by editors who left Canada's best-known medical publication, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*, last year in a disagreement over its editorial independence.

The journal, *Open Medicine*, will be published by a non-profit organization and will not accept advertising from makers of drugs or medical devices. It plans to sustain itself mostly by voluntary contributions for the first year and then start charging authors to publish.

"We are launching *Open Medicine* as an open-access journal because we believe the current, closed-access model is inconsistent with the values of medicine," says co-editor Anita Palepu. Palepu, seven colleagues and 16 board members left the *CMAJ* after two of its editors were dismissed for publishing a politically sensitive news story in the journal.

Correction

In our News Feature "Is French science in decline..." (*Nature* 446, 854; 2007), the axis on the graph should have read: "Gross domestic expenditure on R&D as a percentage of GDP". And the sentence "The challenge for French research in which politicians can make the biggest difference is the decline in government spending" should have referred to 'science' not 'government' spending.