

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

NASA privacy case

The US Supreme Court has ruled that it is “reasonable” for NASA to make far-reaching background checks on the scientists it employs. A group of 28 researchers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, had sued to stop the investigations (see *Nature* 467, 644; 2010). Robert Nelson, a planetary scientist at JPL and a lead plaintiff in the lost lawsuit, told *Nature* that plaintiffs would accept limited checks that were tailored to NASA’s needs, but might leave the space agency should it “persist in undertaking a fishing expedition into the most intimate details of our private lives”.

US–China deals

Officials unveiled a raft of agreements last week during the visit of President Hu Jintao of China to Washington DC. The deals included research partnerships in coal technology, energy efficiency and clean vehicles, under the umbrella of the US–China Clean Energy Research Center. The two countries also agreed to establish a centre of excellence in China to promote nuclear security. See go.nature.com/l7czmr for more.

Carbon heist

The European Commission was forced to partially shut down its carbon-trading market — for a week from 19 January, after carbon credits worth up to €30 million (US\$40 million) were stolen from insecure accounts. The thefts follow earlier scandals, including a massive tax fraud, that have embarrassed Europe’s emissions-trading scheme, a market involving 30 countries,



R. UTRECHT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Dutch protest against university fee hike

The Netherlands saw its largest academic rally in decades on 21 January (pictured), when more than 10,000 Dutch students and around 1,000 professors and rectors protested in The Hague against raised university education fees. As part of budget-saving measures, the coalition government wants to raise €370 million

(US\$500 million) by making students who extend their degrees beyond the standard three years pay an extra €3,000 annually, and by fining their university the same amount. Current standard yearly fees are €1,600, and 16–20% of students on courses at the country’s 14 research universities overextend their studies.

in which companies trade allowances to emit carbon dioxide. See go.nature.com/ympfmu for more. Separately, on 21 January, European Union member states voted that, from 1 May 2013, projects that reduce emissions of industrial hydrofluorocarbon gases will be banned from selling carbon-offset credits under the trading scheme. For years, companies have been accused of perversely increasing production of these gases so as to sell more carbon credits (see *Nature* 445, 595–596; 2007).

Shuttle’s swansong

NASA has added an extra Space Shuttle flight to its schedule of launches this year, even though it has no money to pay for the mission.

The veteran shuttle fleet will be retired after the flight. On 20 January, the space agency said that it would send the *Atlantis* shuttle up to the International Space Station on 28 June. This third shuttle flight of 2011 was mandated by the 2010 NASA Authorization Act, but it has not yet been funded by Congress.

Italian peer review

The Italian government has set in motion its long-promised university evaluation body, ANVUR (National Agency for Evaluation of the University and Research System). On 21 January, it nominated its board of seven academics. ANVUR will evaluate teaching and research at

universities and distribute budgets accordingly. It will also be responsible for ensuring that all public research funds are distributed through peer review. Scientists hope that ANVUR’s competitive funding process will improve patchy research standards in the country (see *Nature* 468, 1001–1002; 2010).

Aid corruption

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria says it is confident that it will not lose support from international donors despite evidence of abuse of its grants in some countries. The corruption, uncovered by the fund’s own Office of the Inspector General last year, was re-reported last week. The fund clarified

that it was demanding the recovery of US\$34 million out of \$13 billion in grants it has disbursed since its creation in 2002. Observers praised the fund for its openness and transparency. See go.nature.com/cybtcd for more.

RESEARCH

European grants

The European Research Council (ERC) has announced the winners of its third round of Advanced Grants, worth a total of €590 million (US\$800 million). The ERC said on 20 January that 266 leading researchers from 26 countries had been awarded grants; 9% of the recipients were women. See go.nature.com/arqgku for more. Meanwhile, the European Commission on 24 January adopted three measures — effective immediately — to simplify the process of applying for European Union research funds under the Seventh Framework Programme (see *Nature* **465**, 22; 2010).

Daisy delisted

Species join the US Endangered Species list much more frequently than they leave it. But the US Fish and Wildlife Service said on 18 January that it is set to remove the Maguire daisy (*Erigeron maguirei*) — a perennial shrub that grows

on flat hills in Utah — from the list in a month's time. The daisy is just the twenty-first species to be 'delisted' owing to recovery. Although habitat protection had a role in the plant's comeback, much of the credit goes to taxonomists who merged two varieties of the daisy into one species, thereby instantly increasing its numbers.

PEOPLE



Ecology award

Finnish ecologist Ilkka Hanski (pictured) has won the 2011 Crafoord Prize in Biosciences, worth 4 million Swedish kronor (US\$603,000). Hanski, of the University of Helsinki, Finland, was chosen for his lifetime's work analysing how populations of animals and plants respond to changing and fragmented habitats. His theories have formed the "cornerstones of research on biodiversity", said the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences,

which awarded the prize on 20 January. See go.nature.com/tjgdu for more.

Climate tzar retreat

Carol Browner, informally known as the 'climate tzar' of US President Barack Obama, is stepping down, White House officials said on 24 January. Her departure from the role of director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change leaves Obama's strategy on climate change unclear; as *Nature* went to press, no replacement had been confirmed.

BUSINESS

Deep-sea mining

Nautilus Minerals has obtained the world's first lease to mine minerals under the ocean, it said on 17 January. The 20-year lease from Papua New Guinea allows the company, based in Toronto, Canada, to progress with plans to start mining for copper and gold in a 59-square-kilometre area in the Pacific Ocean north of Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, from 2013.

Antibodies deal

Pfizer has agreed to pay up to US\$632 million to Theraclone Sciences, a biotech firm based in Seattle, Washington, for access to the company's therapeutic antibody technology. Theraclone

COMING UP

30–31 JANUARY

An assembly of the African Union in Addis Ababa follows a week's summit attended by more than 30 heads of state. Climate change and development in the continent are on the agenda.

go.nature.com/zz9ghv

2–5 FEBRUARY

The latest advances in DNA sequencing are discussed at the annual Advances in Genome Biology and Technology meeting in Marco Island, Florida.

<http://agbt.org>

will work with Pfizer, headquartered in New York, to identify human antibodies against four targets in infectious disease and cancer. Details of the deal — such as upfront research funding — were not disclosed when it was announced on 19 January, but it marks Pfizer's latest attempt to enter the lucrative field of biological therapies.

Plastic electronics

Russia's ambitious nanotechnology plans were highlighted by the announcement of a US\$200-million investment in Plastic Logic, a company headquartered in Mountain View, California, that hopes to make flexible electronic readers. The state-owned Russian Corporation of Nanotechnologies (known as Rusnano) in Moscow revealed the sum last week, although the deal, involving a factory to be built in Zelenograd, was trailed last November. Plastic Logic was spun out of research at the University of Cambridge, UK, in 2000. See go.nature.com/rsv4rk for more.

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BUSINESS WATCH

US venture capitalists spent more money in 2010 than in the previous year — stemming two years of falling investment. Biotechnology saw only a modest increase, but the clean-technology sector improved greatly. Significant investments in the last quarter of the year included US\$110 million for Abound Solar, a Colorado-based photovoltaic manufacturer, and \$100 million for Elevance Renewable Sciences, a California-based start-up that makes chemicals and fuels from renewable feedstocks.

VENTURE CAPITAL RECOVERY

The cleantech industry was a main beneficiary of increased venture capital spending in 2010.

