

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## POLICY

### Irish election

Scientists in the Republic of Ireland hope that support for science will continue after the Fine Gael party came to power in elections held on 25 February, ousting the long-standing incumbents, Fianna Fáil. Fine Gael, which must form a coalition government, will have to deal with the country's economic crisis by cutting some public spending. The party is opposed to research using human embryonic stem cells, which has never benefited from clear regulation in Ireland. See [go.nature.com/ftx2hu](http://go.nature.com/ftx2hu) for more.

### Forest mission

India will spend 460 billion rupees (US\$10 billion) over a decade planting new forests and improving the quality of tree cover in existing forests, according to a plan approved by the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change on 23 February. Subject to expected parliamentary approval, this 'National Mission for a Green India' — one of eight missions under a national action plan on climate change — will start from 2012.

### Push for carbon tax

Australia's prime minister Julia Gillard has proposed placing a fixed tax on carbon dioxide from July 2012, calling the move "an essential economic reform". It is the third time that Australia's government has vowed to tax carbon emissions to tackle climate change; Gillard's predecessor Kevin Rudd twice failed to get a carbon-cutting bill past his Senate. Speaking on 24 February, Gillard said she hoped to move to a market-based emissions trading scheme three to five years after the fixed price comes in. Its value has not yet been decided.



M. CONLUN/OSF/PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

## Dire threats to coral reefs

More than 60% of the world's coral reefs are directly threatened by local human activities such as coastal pollution and destructive fishing. When global pressures, including rising ocean temperatures or ocean acidification, are taken into account, about 75% are threatened, with the proportion expected to rise to 90%

by 2030. The World Resources Institute in Washington DC published the statistics on 23 February in *Reefs at Risk*, a report updating a 1998 study. The latest report emphasized that reefs affect society, providing food and coastline protection, and said that they can rebound if communities stop unsustainable practices.

### Egypt reshuffle

As protests continue across the Arab world, Egypt's interim cabinet was reshuffled last week and included new appointees to oversee education and science. Amr Salama, a professor of civil engineering, is minister of scientific research, replacing Hani Helal. Ahmed Gamal Moussa replaces Ahmed Zaki Badr as education minister. Both appointees are respected by scientists and had held similar positions in 2004, only to be sacked a year later. They may have little chance to make an impact, with the interim government in place for six months at most. See [go.nature.com/ghqimz](http://go.nature.com/ghqimz) for more.

### India's budget

Indian scientists were disappointed by increases in funding for research

agencies in the country's 2011–12 budget, presented on 28 February. The Indian ministry for science and technology saw a 17% increase on last year's budget to some 75.5 billion rupees (US\$1.67 billion), while atomic energy and space also saw double-digit percentage increases. But with the economy booming and inflation running above 8%, "if we want to catch up with China we must make big investments in science", C. N. R. Rao, chairman of the prime minister's scientific advisory council, told *Nature*. "These lollipops will not do."

supplies and additional science capabilities to the International Space Station on an 11-day mission. NASA's other two shuttles are each due to fly once more this year before the agency's shuttle fleet retires.

### Unethical studies

A meeting of the US presidential bioethics commission in Washington DC this week triggered reporting of past unethical human experiments by US researchers, mostly from the 1940s to the 1960s. The commission met in part to discuss last year's revelations that US government researchers secretly gave syphilis to hundreds of Guatemalan prison inmates in the 1940s (see *Nature* 467, 645; 2010). But the Associated Press, trawling medical journals and old newspaper

## RESEARCH

### Shuttle swansong

NASA's space shuttle *Discovery* launched for its 39th and final flight on 24 February, taking six astronauts as well as

articles, dug up more than 40 instances of similarly dubious tests. All had been publicly disclosed, unlike the syphilis experiments, but did not draw the condemnation at the time that they would today.

## Oil-spill health study

A study claiming to be the largest ever to follow up the long-term effects of an oil spill on human health was launched on 28 February (see [nihgulfstudy.org](http://nihgulfstudy.org)). The National Institutes of Health says it has committed US\$19 million to the project so far; its National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences hopes to spend a decade following 55,000 of the workers and volunteers who supported the clean-up effort after the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

## Booking a rocket

The first contracts have been signed to send researchers into suborbit using commercial spacecraft. The Southwest Research Institute, in San Antonio, Texas, said last week it had paid for six scientists to fly with XCOR Aerospace, based in Mojave, California, and had paid deposits for two scientists to fly with Virgin Galactic, whose spacecraft will take off from Spaceport America in New Mexico. The institute may opt to purchase a total of 17 seats

with the two companies, each costing US\$100,000–200,000. Scientists would conduct experiments including biomedical monitoring and atmospheric imaging.

## Viral response plan

Medical virologists from around the world gathered in Washington DC on 1–3 March to work out the details of a Global Virus Response Network. Meeting attendees, invited by virologist Robert Gallo of the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore, hope to form an organization that would act as a global first-responder to identify, investigate and eradicate viral outbreaks. The network would also inform governments, health organizations and the public about existing viruses and attract scientists to the field.

## Wheat killer

A research programme tackling a devastating wheat fungus has been granted US\$40 million over five years as part of a partnership between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington, and the UK Department of International Development. The Durable Rust Resistance in Wheat project, involving more than a dozen institutes and coordinated by Cornell University in Ithaca, New

York, aims to create plants that can withstand strains of the evolving stem-rust pathogen Ug99. See [go.nature.com/4wm8te](http://go.nature.com/4wm8te) for more.

### PEOPLE



## German plagiarism

Germany's defence minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (pictured), has resigned after a row over plagiarism in his PhD thesis. The University of Bayreuth withdrew Guttenberg's doctoral thesis in law last week, confirming that large parts of the document, written in 2006, were plagiarised. German chancellor Angela Merkel initially argued that academic wrongdoings didn't diminish Guttenberg's political merits, but public pressure forced his resignation on 1 March. Thousands of German academics and doctoral students had joined the outcry, signing an online letter complaining that Merkel was trivializing academic plagiarism.

## COMING UP

### 3–6 MARCH

The American Association for Cancer Research hosts a conference in Vancouver, Canada, exploring links between stem cells and cancer. [go.nature.com/5lwqim](http://go.nature.com/5lwqim)

### 7–11 MARCH

Preliminary analysis of dust picked up from a distant asteroid last year by the Hayabusa spacecraft will be among highlights of the 42nd Lunar and Planetary Science Conference in The Woodlands, near Houston, Texas. [go.nature.com/eugq9g](http://go.nature.com/eugq9g)

### 9–13 MARCH

The 10th International Conference on Alzheimer's & Parkinson's Diseases will take place in Barcelona, Spain, and focus on new possibilities for treating the conditions. [go.nature.com/jcgygu](http://go.nature.com/jcgygu)

## Climate inquiry

An inquiry has exonerated climate scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Washington DC of data manipulation or unethical behaviour. Requested by Senator James Inhofe (Republican, Oklahoma), it is the latest of many investigations to clear researchers of implications of scientific misconduct in e-mails from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, UK, leaked in November 2009. In a report released on 24 February, the inspector general of the US commerce department, who headed the inquiry, found no evidence of wrongdoing in the e-mails.

### NATURE.COM

For daily news updates see: [www.nature.com/news](http://www.nature.com/news)

## TREND WATCH

Developing countries look poised to overtake industrialized countries in planting genetically modified (GM) crops (see chart). Brazil, Argentina, India, China and South Africa together accounted for 43% of the global total of biotech crops planted commercially last year. In 2010, Pakistan and Myanmar grew GM crops commercially for the first time, opting for biotech cotton. Sweden also made its first foray into commercial GM crops, planting the 'Amflora' high-starch potato.

## DEVELOPING COUNTRIES DRIVE GM CROP RISE

Planting of genetically modified (GM) crops grew by 10% in 2010 to 148 million hectares worldwide.

