

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

India's GM caution

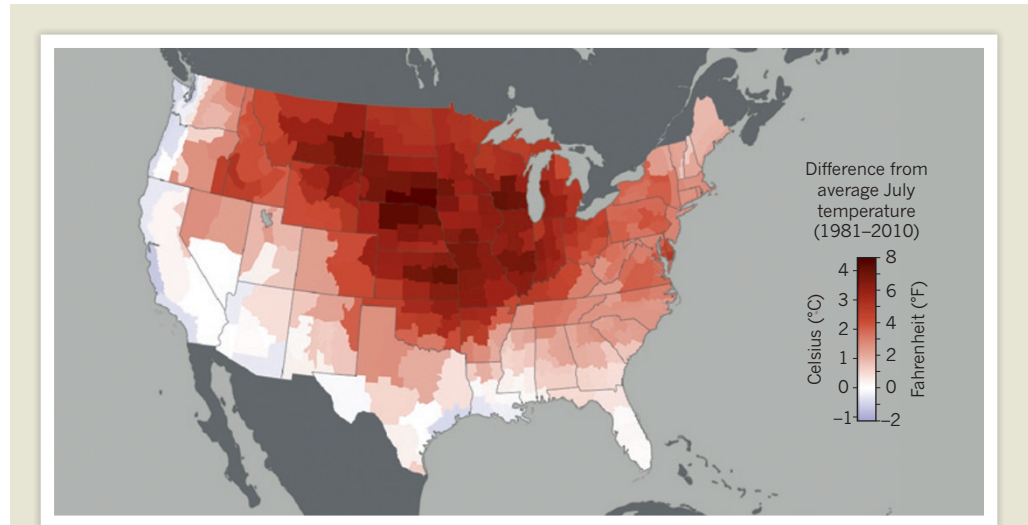
A cross-party panel of politicians in India has urged the government to halt all open-field trials of transgenic crops until it develops a better monitoring and oversight system. In a report released on 9 August, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture in India also called for a complete overhaul of the regulatory system for transgenic-crop approvals and recommended that all genetically modified (GM) products be labelled. India has approved only one GM crop (cotton) for cultivation; GM brinjal (aubergine) was approved in 2009, but in 2010 the government banned its cultivation indefinitely, after public opposition. See go.nature.com/r6zcy8 for more.

Development work

The United Nations said on 9 August that it is to set up a global network of research centres, universities and institutes to help identify the best paths to sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network will be directed by economist Jeffrey Sachs, who founded the Millennium Villages international development project and heads the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York City. The move follows on from the UN's Rio+20 conference on sustainable development in June.

Swine-flu alert

The number of reported cases in an outbreak of H3N2v virus — a variant strain of swine flu that can pass from pigs to humans — took a sudden spike last week. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, reported 154 cases



US swelters in hottest month ever

July was the hottest month ever recorded in the United States, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration revealed on 8 August. The average temperature across the continental states was 25.3°C, one-tenth of a degree above the previous 1936 July record.

Compared with the average for 1981–2010, some parts of the country recorded lower temperatures (blue), whereas parts of the Midwest and the northern Rocky Mountains chalked up readings as high as 4.4°C above (dark red). See go.nature.com/g94jrm for more.

on 10 August, up from 16 on 3 August; by 13 August the total had reached 176. Most are in Indiana and all are the result of contact with pigs by farmers or through agricultural fairs. Symptoms are mild, and the virus does not seem to transmit between humans. But it is raising eyebrows because it contains a gene from the H1N1 pandemic strain that may increase transmissibility among humans. See go.nature.com/z75z8k for more.

Russia's space woes

Failures in Russia's space launches have drawn the ire of the country's prime minister. Dmitry Medvedev said on 9 August that the botched launch of two communications satellites earlier that week was costing the country money and prestige, and that he would chair a meeting to look

into the failures. Russia lost three navigation satellites in December 2010; a military satellite in February 2011; a telecommunications satellite that August; and the Phobos-Grunt mission to the Martian moon Phobos in November.

EVENTS

Agent Orange

The United States launched an effort on 9 August to clean up dioxin-contaminated soil left over from the Vietnam War at a former American airbase near Da Nang city, Vietnam. The site was one of many hotspots that still have especially high concentrations of dioxins after being sprayed with herbicides such as the infamous Agent Orange (used to defoliate jungle vegetation) from 1962 to 1971. The remediation project, funded by the US government

through the US Agency for International Development, is expected to cost US\$43 million and take four years.

Iran earthquakes

Two earthquakes of magnitudes 6.3 and 6.4 struck near Ahar in northwestern Iran on 11 August, injuring thousands in rural villages and resulting in a death toll reported at more than 300 people as *Nature* went to press. The region has experienced seven quakes of magnitude 6 or above in the past 40 years, the US Geological Survey says.

BUSINESS

Battery rescue

A123 Systems, a leading US manufacturer of lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles, may have found a solution to its financial woes. The firm, based in Waltham, Massachusetts,

said on 8 August that it had reached preliminary agreement for an investment of up to US\$450 million from Wanxiang Group, China's largest maker of automobile parts, based in Zhejiang. Formed in 2001, A123 is a spin-off from work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. In May, it warned investors that it was struggling for cash, and it has now reported net losses of \$208 million for the first half of 2012.

Material gains

Oil and gas giant BP will invest US\$100 million over ten years in a university-based research centre for advanced materials, it announced on 7 August. With a hub at the University of Manchester, UK, the centre will have smaller UK branches at Imperial College London and the University of Cambridge, and a US branch at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It will look at research issues important to BP, such as developing metal alloys that can work in deep-water drilling and membranes for purifying oil, gas, water and biofuels. See go.nature.com/lyzvf6 for more.

Drug-discovery split

Irish pharmaceutical company Elan is to split into two, completely separating its

drug-discovery work from the main business. The firm, which is based in Dublin, plans to spin off its research work into a small separate company called Neotope Biosciences, which will have its operations base in South San Francisco, California, and will be given at least US\$120 million in start-up funding. Elan itself will keep ownership of assets such as its stake in multiple-sclerosis drug Tysabri (natalizumab). The separation, announced on 13 August, should be complete by the end of the year, Elan said.

PEOPLE

Misconduct fall-out

A prominent Danish neuroscientist could lose her PhD and medical-sciences doctorate, after an 8 August report from a panel assembled by University of Copenhagen found evidence that she might have manipulated data in 15 papers. Milena Penkowa (**pictured**), who resigned from the university in December 2010, has denied the accusations in a response appended to the report. The government-run Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty will now determine whether Penkowa committed research misconduct, and an academic council at the university will decide whether she can keep



the advanced degrees she earned there. See go.nature.com/adhb1u for more.

RESEARCH

Temperature record

Physicists at the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, Europe's particle-physics laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland, say that they have achieved the hottest man-made temperatures ever, by colliding lead ions to create a quark-gluon plasma. Presenting data on 13 August at the Quark Matter 2012 meeting in Washington DC, researchers on the ALICE heavy-ion experiment said that they had created a plasma 38% hotter than the record 4-trillion-degree-Celsius plasma achieved in 2010 by a similar experiment at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York. The measurement has not yet been converted into a temperature, but could produce something like

COMING UP

17–23 AUGUST
NASA's Mars rover Curiosity will attempt its first drive on the red planet next week — although no firm date had been set as *Nature* went to press.
www.nasa.gov/msl

19–23 AUGUST
The American Chemical Society holds its autumn meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, focusing on materials for health and medicine.
go.nature.com/tej8tw

23–25 AUGUST
The brain's connectome — along with other ways of mapping neurons and neuronal circuits — features on the agenda of the 3rd Annual Aspen Brain Forum in Colorado.
<http://aspenbrainforum.com>

5.5 trillion degrees Celsius, says ALICE spokesman Paolo Giubellino. See go.nature.com/kvuq7k for more.

Trust, but verify

An effort to encourage authors of high-profile research papers to get their results replicated by independent labs was launched on 14 August. The Reproducibility Initiative will work through Science Exchange, an online marketplace based in Palo Alto, California, that connects researchers wishing to outsource their experiments with service providers. The initiative will start by accepting 40–50 studies for validation, said Science Exchange. Authors will pay for validation studies themselves, and will be able to publish the results in *PLoS ONE*. See go.nature.com/gc9i9v for more.

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TREND WATCH

The US Department of Agriculture predicted on 10 August that the nation's maize (corn) yields would drop to a 17-year low in 2012–13 (see chart), after a catastrophic drought that has scorched fields and sent food prices soaring. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has suggested that the United States suspend biofuel production from maize, and US President Barack Obama unveiled an aid package for stricken farmers on 13 August.

MAIZE PROJECTIONS PLUMMET

The US Department of Agriculture has reduced its forecasts for maize (corn) production following the worst drought in 50 years.

