

POLICY

Scotland stays

On 18 September, voters in Scotland decided by a majority of 55% to remain part of the United Kingdom. Many scientists cheered the result, saying it would give Scotland continued access to its current levels of research funding from UK-wide sources. See *Nature* <http://doi.org/vt2> (2014) and page 460 for more.

Ebola threat

The Ebola virus strain spreading throughout West Africa could be deadlier than thought, with a death rate of about 70% instead of 50%, epidemiologists report (WHO Ebola Response Team *N. Engl. J. Med.* <http://doi.org/vvw>; 2014). Patients treated in hospital seem to have the best chance of surviving, the authors say. Meanwhile, the United States and the United Nations have pledged to ramp up their response to the crisis. See page 469 and go.nature.com/qak4pe for more.

Antibiotics push

The US government released a national strategy on 18 September to combat antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The plan includes improved methods for diagnosing and tracking antibiotic-resistant infections, and incentives for researchers and drug companies to develop new antibiotics. See page 471 and go.nature.com/bgvuz for more.

GM crops approved

The US Department of Agriculture approved on 17 September the commercialization of genetically modified (GM) maize (corn) and soya beans that are engineered to tolerate two herbicides. The agency also announced



NOAH BERGER/REUTERS/CORBIS

Extreme drought fuels California fires

Firefighters in California last week battled to gain control of several large wildfires that raged through the central and northern parts of the drought-stricken state. The most significant blaze, the King Fire near Placerville (pictured), started on 13 September, and by 23 September had burned more than 350 square kilometres. The California

drought, now in its third year, has wreaked havoc on native ecosystems (see *Nature* 512, 121–122; 2014) and exacerbated seasonal fire risks. On 16 September, in response to the water shortage, Governor Jerry Brown signed a series of bills that would begin to regulate the extraction of groundwater, which supplies 40–60% of California's water usage.

that it would deregulate the traits, developed by Dow AgroSciences of Indianapolis, Indiana. The Environmental Protection Agency has yet to rule on the company's herbicide — a mix of glyphosate and 2,4-D — to be used on the plants. The GM crops and herbicide mix will probably be used to combat the rise in glyphosate-resistant weeds, but some worry that overuse will lead to weeds that are resistant to both herbicides (see *Nature* 510, 187; 2014).

HFC sunset

To accelerate the phase-out of potent greenhouse gases used in refrigerants and air conditioning, US President Barack Obama announced on 16 September pledges from

major chemical companies and retail firms to shift rapidly away from the use of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). The voluntary commitments are expected to reduce global HFC consumption by the equivalent of 700 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2025, the White House says.

Rules for whaling

At a meeting last week in Portoroz, Slovenia, the International Whaling Commission passed tougher rules for proposed 'scientific' whaling projects, adding a list of criteria that includes consideration of whether lethal catches are scientifically reasonable. Scientific whaling is controversial, and some

researchers allege that Japan has used it as a cover for commercial whaling. The International Court of Justice ruled earlier this year that Japan's hunts were not for scientific purposes, but Japan has pledged to revise its scientific-hunting scheme.

EVENTS

Sea-ice minimum

Arctic sea-ice coverage reached its probable annual minimum on 17 September, spanning 5.02 million square kilometres. The measurement, reported by the US National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado, continues a trend of lower-than-average coverage, and is the sixth-lowest in the satellite record.

Meanwhile, sea ice around Antarctica continues to follow an opposite trend, exceeding the record maximum extent set last year. See go.nature.com/urlbe6 for more.

RESEARCH

NIH cleared

US government inspectors have concluded that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) did not interfere in the oversight of a controversial clinical trial in premature infants. A public watchdog organization had alleged that the NIH acted inappropriately in 2013 when the agency disputed findings from the Office for Human Research Protections, which said that consent forms failed to fully disclose the trial's risks (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/vt3>; 2014). In a report last week, inspectors concluded that the NIH merely argued its case without overstepping its bounds.

Arrival at Mars

Mission scientists and engineers (pictured at Lockheed Martin in Littleton, Colorado) cheered the insertion of NASA's MAVEN spacecraft (Mars Atmosphere and Volatile Evolution) into orbit around Mars on 21 September, after a ten-month journey. The mission will focus on studying the



upper atmosphere of the red planet. See go.nature.com/px22mw for more.

FUNDING

US spending bill

The US Congress has passed a US\$1.012-trillion stopgap spending bill, which would fund government operations from 1 October — the start of the 2015 fiscal year — until 11 December. The bill includes \$30 million to send health workers and resources to fight the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and \$58 million to develop drugs and vaccines against the disease. See go.nature.com/pg1oxq for more.

AWARDS

Genius grants

The MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, announced the recipients of its 2014 'genius

grants' on 17 September. Winners include Yitang Zhang, a mathematician at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, who in May 2013 made a major breakthrough towards proving that prime numbers follow a particular pattern, called the 'twin-prime conjecture' (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/vrs>; 2013). Each MacArthur Fellows Program award comes with a no-strings-attached US\$625,000 stipend paid over five years. See go.nature.com/arjf37 for more.

BUSINESS

Pharma firm fined

A Chinese court has fined drug giant GlaxoSmithKline £297 million (US\$485 million) after finding it guilty of bribery, the London-based firm said on 19 September. The verdict follows an investigation into whether the company bribed physicians and officials to

COMING UP

26–30 SEPTEMBER

The European Society for Medical Oncology holds its 2014 meeting in Madrid. Researchers will discuss blood biomarkers of cancer, genetic heterogeneity in tumours and advances in clinical-trial design. go.nature.com/l9rynb

boost sales in China. Five of the company's managers were convicted of bribery-related charges and received suspended prison sentences, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Focus on bioscience

German chemical company Bayer said on 18 September that it would spin off its materials-science division as a separate company, and focus solely on life sciences. The Leverkusen-based firm will shift resources towards expanding its health-care and crop-science divisions, which together generated about €29 billion (US\$36 billion) in sales last year — roughly 70% of the company's total sales.

Space taxis

US astronauts will soon fly to and from the International Space Station on spacecraft operated by two private companies, NASA announced on 16 September. Since the agency retired the space-shuttle programme in 2011, astronauts have been relying on Russian Soyuz vehicles. Now NASA has given grants of US\$4.2 billion to Boeing of Chicago, Illinois, and \$2.6 billion to SpaceX of Hawthorne, California; each will demonstrate at least one crewed test flight and then conduct between two and six crewed missions to the space station. The flights are slated to begin in 2017.

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TREND WATCH

US employment rates for PhD recipients in science, engineering and health increased slightly from 97.6% in 2010 to 97.9% in 2013, according to statistics published this month by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics in Arlington, Virginia. Mathematics and statistics doctorates had the highest rates of employment, while physical scientists and engineers saw the steepest increases in employment since 2010.

BACK TO WORK

Employment rates for most US science PhDs rose in 2013, but prospects stayed flat for biology graduates.

