

NEWS BRIEFING

● POLICY

NASA costs: There are four main reasons for the cost growth of NASA missions, says a 13 July report by the National Academies in Washington DC: overly optimistic estimates, shifting mission requirements, problems with instrument and technology development, and problems with launch services. The report recommends keeping a close eye on the most expensive missions. In an analysis of 40 missions launched from 1996 to 2007, the study found that 14 of them — including some with the highest initial prices — were responsible for 92% of the growth in cost. The worst offender was the Spitzer Space Telescope, which overshot its cost estimate by US\$170 million.

Action on Europe's GM crops:

The European Commission plans to let European Union (EU) member states decide for themselves whether to grow or ban any genetically modified (GM) crop that has been approved as safe for health and the environment. The proposal, published on 13 July, is aimed at breaking the impasse that has followed a 2001 directive giving EU-wide approval for farmers to cultivate any GM crop deemed safe by the union's own science-based authorization procedure. Dissenting countries have regularly nullified this procedure by claiming new evidence of possible danger to the environment, so no GM food crop has been approved for cultivation in the EU since the directive came into force.

HIV strategy: The United States has unveiled a five-year strategy to reduce by a quarter the number of its citizens becoming infected with HIV. Some 1.1 million Americans live with HIV and there are 56,000 new infections a year, a rate that has not changed significantly in the past decade. The plan, released on 13 July, has been granted US\$30 million to redirect treatment towards



FINGERS CROSSED FOR BP OIL CAP

BP officials (pictured, in Houston, Texas) are still monitoring the cap put in place last week to plug the disastrous leaking oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. The company initially said that the cap — attached atop the broken 'blowout preventer' that should have sealed the well in April — had stopped the flow of oil. But pressure build-up behind the cap was lower than expected, suggesting a leak. As *Nature* went to press, government officials were deciding whether to order the reopening of cap valves, so that oil could be piped through the cap and collected at the surface again. Final closure of the well still depends on relief wells currently being drilled, which are likely to be ready in the first half of August, says BP.

at-risk groups and connect newly diagnosed patients to clinical care more quickly.

ITER cash-drain: The European Commission has suggested that €460 million (US\$594 million) be taken from Europe's Seventh Framework Programme for Research in 2012 and 2013, to partly make up for a €1.4-billion budget deficit at the experimental ITER fusion reactor. The rest of the money would come from other European Union budgets, the commission announced on 20 July. Its proposal followed last week's agreement by ministers at a European Council meeting that there would be no new cash from member states to relieve the ITER shortfall (see *Nature* 466, 171; 2010).

Restrictions on Avandia: An advisory panel at the US Food and Drug Administration on 14 July recommended restricting the distribution of Avandia. Twelve of the 33-member panel voted to remove the drug from

the market altogether. The once-popular diabetes drug, made by GlaxoSmithKline, has recently been linked to an increased risk of heart attack and death in some studies. See page 420 for more.

US oceans policy: US President Barack Obama launched a national oceans policy on 19 July, which aims to integrate the current disjointed regulation of activities jostling for use of coastal and marine areas — such as fisheries, shipping lanes, boating, wind turbines, aquaculture and marine protection. A National Ocean Council would coordinate the overall strategy. The policy follows the recommendations of an interagency task force (see *Nature* 465, 9; 2010).

Cellulosic disappointment: The US Environmental Protection Agency has again acknowledged that production of biofuels made from cellulose is nowhere near the levels it had hoped for three years ago. On 9 July it proposed

SOUND BITES

"This is not about being anti-rock."

US senator Gloria Romero explains why she has sponsored a bill that would stop serpentine being the official state rock of California — because one of its subtypes is chrysotile, a form of asbestos. Geologists are arguing against the bill.

Source: *New York Times*, 13 July

slashing a federal mandate that had required 946 million litres of cellulosic biofuels to be blended into petrol in 2011. The new goal is just 19 million–64 million litres. The agency has already scaled back its 2010 cellulosic biofuel requirement (see *Nature* 463, 715; 2010), and will probably continue to make annual adjustments.

● **RESEARCH**

Gel prevents HIV infection: South African women who used a microbicide vaginal gel containing the antiretroviral drug tenofovir cut their risk of HIV infection by 39% overall. Those who used the gel before and after sex more than 80% of the time cut their risk by 54%. The results from the three-year double-blind, randomized controlled trial, which involved 889 women, were published on 19 July (Q. A. Karim *et al. Science* doi:10.1126/science.1193748; 2010). No microbicide gel has before been conclusively shown to protect women from HIV infection. See go.nature.com/Zmigix for more.

Arctic melting: The Arctic has set another record for losing sea ice. Last month saw the lowest extent of sea ice in the Arctic for any June since satellite records started in 1979, according to the US National Snow and Ice Data Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Meanwhile, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration noted on 15 July that last month was the hottest June on record. The combined global land and ocean average surface

**NEWS
MAKER**



Paul Nurse
The Nobel laureate and next president of Britain's Royal Society will also, from 2011, head up a £600-million (US\$917-million) medical-research complex planned for the centre of London.

temperature was 16.2 °C, compared to the twentieth-century average of 15.5 °C.

Illegal logging: Although it remains rife in many countries, illegal logging is down an estimated 22% worldwide since 2002, according to a report released on 15 July by Chatham House, a London-based think tank. The report's authors called for stricter enforcement at

'processing countries', such as China and Vietnam, through which illegal wood often passes on its way to consumers. Stemming illegal wood cutting is also a cheap way to reduce carbon emissions, they add. See go.nature.com/dzfhw2 for more.

Record burst: The brightest blast of X-ray light ever detected temporarily blinded the NASA Swift telescope on 21 June — raising the upper intensity limit for γ-ray bursts by fivefold. These explosions occur when massive, dying stars turn into black holes, and the Swift observatory, which launched in 2004, was specifically designed to handle the light from these objects. But the blast from a burst 5 billion light years away briefly slammed Swift's detectors with too many photons to count, NASA revealed last week.

● **PEOPLE**

Iranian nuclear mystery: Shahram Amiri, an Iranian nuclear scientist who claimed that he was kidnapped by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), returned to Tehran from the United States on 15 July. He told reporters in Iran that he had been tortured. US officials said that he had willingly cooperated with the CIA for several years from Tehran, before coming to America of his own volition.

Climate scientist dies: Stephen Schneider, a prominent climatologist and leading scientific voice in the battle to address global warming, died on 19 June, aged 65, after an apparent heart attack during a

**THE WEEK
AHEAD**

22-28 JULY
Results from the Large Hadron Collider will be presented at the 35th International Conference on High-Energy Physics in Paris. See also page 426.
♦ www.ichep2010.fr

26-31 JULY
Singapore hosts a feast of meetings on ethical practice in medicine and biology: the World Health Organization's 8th Global Summit of National Bioethics Advisory Bodies is followed by the 10th World Congress of Bioethics.
♦ go.nature.com/E2BYQS
♦ go.nature.com/rcrlmV

27-28 JULY
In Cadarache, France, the council of the fusion project ITER will hear the management strategy of their new director-general — expected to be Japanese physicist Osamu Motojima.
♦ www.iter.org

flight from Stockholm to London. Schneider, of Stanford University in California, founded the journal *Climatic Change* in 1975 and was also a key participant in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He was awarded the McArthur 'genius' Fellowship in 1992 and, with his wife, Stanford biologist Terry Root, the National Wildlife Federation's National Conservation Achievement Award in 2003.

BUSINESS WATCH

An advisory panel of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) narrowly voted against approving the first of a new wave of obesity drugs, the diet pill Qnexa (phentermine plus topiramate), last week, because of lingering safety concerns over side effects. The 15 July recommendation sent the share price of the drug's developer, Vivus of Mountain View, California, plummeting by 55%. Two other California-based companies are vying for a slice of the lucrative obesity market: Arena Pharmaceuticals in San Diego, which champions lorcaserin, and Orexigen in La Jolla, backers of Contrave (naltrexone plus bupropion). Any given the green light would be the first FDA-

approved obesity drugs in more than a decade. The 'no' vote was not unexpected. Obesity drugs will probably be used by many Americans and so are held to high safety standards. But Eric Colman, deputy director of the FDA's metabolic and endocrinology products division, said he was surprised by the non-endorsement, prompting analysts Canaccord Genuity, headquartered in Toronto, Canada, to write that the regulators seem "amenable to approving new weight-loss agents". The FDA is due to issue its decision on Qnexa by 28 October. It should rule on lorcaserin in October and on Contrave in January 2011, following upcoming advisory panel votes.

