

NEWS BRIEFING

● POLICY

Sugar-beet ban: Farmers in the United States have been blocked from planting genetically modified sugar beets after a US federal judge revoked the government's 2005 approval of the crop. The decision on 13 August means that the beets — which at present provide around half of the US sugar supply — cannot be grown until the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) completes an environmental-impact statement, which could take until the end of April 2012. Environmental organizations including the Sierra Club and the Center for Food Safety, headquartered in California and Washington DC, respectively, sued the USDA in 2008 for approving the sugar beet without adequately assessing the effects that it could have on weeds and nearby conventional crops.

Berry bank threatened:

Europe's largest repository of rare berries and fruit faces closure after a Moscow court ruled on 11 August against an appeal to preserve it. Pavlovsk Experimental Station, an 84-year-old gene bank outside St Petersburg, houses more than 5,000 crop varieties, but a government development agency wants to bulldoze the site. The Vavilov Institute of Plant Industry in St Petersburg, which runs the station, has a month to appeal the decision. The Twitter account of Russia's president, Dmitri Medvedev (@KremlinRussia_E), stated on 13 August that the issue would be "scrutinised", giving campaigners hope. See go.nature.com/YJpZmb for more.

US astronomy survey: The US National Academy of Science has released its decadal survey, a much-anticipated report recommending the astronomy and astrophysics research projects that US agencies should fund over the next ten years. The report, published on 13 August, says that a space telescope that could search for clues to dark energy



K.M. CHAUDARY/AP

DISEASE FOLLOWS DELUGE IN PAKISTAN

As nearly three weeks of floods in Pakistan displaced tens of millions of people and killed around 1,500, the United Nations this week warned of the spread of acute diarrhoea and water-borne diseases such as dysentery and cholera. In a report released on 16 August, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs added that the floods would have a catastrophic effect on agricultural livelihoods, with extensive damage to standing crops — such as maize (corn), cotton and rice — and stored planting seeds, including the major staple food crop wheat. The summer monsoon was exacerbated this year by an unusual jet-stream pattern in the upper atmosphere; the same weather phenomenon has been linked to the Russian heatwave and resulting peat fires.

and for exoplanets should be top priority for large space activities (projects exceeding US\$1 billion). See page 910 for more.

Pandemic over: The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on 10 August that the world is no longer experiencing an H1N1 influenza virus pandemic. An emergency committee, which convened that day, said that countries were generally not reporting out-of-season outbreaks of the flu strain, and that H1N1 would probably take on the behaviour of a seasonal flu virus. Margaret Chan, director-general of the WHO, said the pandemic had turned out better than feared because the virus hadn't mutated into a more lethal form and drug resistance hadn't developed. "We have been aided by pure good luck," she said.

● RESEARCH

Student gene-testing dropped: The University of California, Berkeley, has been barred from

providing incoming students with personal analyses of three common genetic variants. The educational programme had drawn criticism for its handling of ethical and legal issues since its announcement in May (see *Nature* 465, 845–846; 2010). California's health department ruled on 11 August that such analyses constitute medical information, so must be conducted under a doctor's order and at a clinically certified lab. The university will now not release individual results, but will still analyse some 700 student samples received, and discuss them in bulk.

Harvard first: Harvard has once again topped the influential university rankings list produced by the Institute of Higher Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China. Harvard, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been ranked number one ever since the table was first produced in 2003. Released last week, the survey uses six indicators, including

NUMBER CRUNCH

12 m ha

The amount of land (an area the size of Benin) lost every year to desertification, according to the United Nations, which on 16 August launched a ten-year campaign to halt the advance of deserts.

P. VISHWANATHAN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Nobel prizes won, publications in *Nature* and *Science*, and highly cited researchers in various subject categories. In individual disciplines, Princeton University in New Jersey took top spot for mathematics and the University of California, Berkeley, led in chemistry.

Weapons lab lawsuit: A non-profit watchdog filed a lawsuit on 16 August to stop the construction of a US\$4-billion weapons facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. The Los Alamos Study Group says that the nuclear facility, the core of the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement (CMRR) project, has violated federal law by failing to produce an environmental-impact statement. An extensive redesign of the CMRR project means that an impact statement for an earlier version of the facility in 2003 no longer applies, the group says.

● BUSINESS

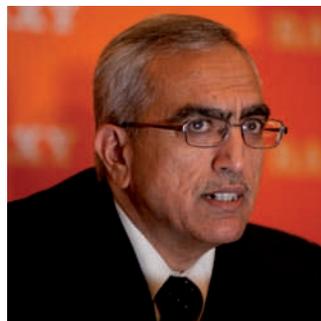
Battery start-up: A123 Systems, a rechargeable-battery company spun out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and based in Watertown, Massachusetts, has spawned an energy-storage company, 24M Technologies. The venture will develop rechargeable power units that combine elements from fuel cells and liquid-based batteries. 24M has US\$10 million in venture-capital funding, and shares a \$6-million grant from the US Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy with Rutgers University in New Brunswick,

SOUND BITES

“He’s been in slow-motion fall for the last three years, but it hasn’t slowed him down one bit.”

Michael Tomasello, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, comments on the misconduct investigation into prominent Harvard University psychologist Marc Hauser. See page 908 for more.

Source: New York Times, 13 August



based in Tokyo. Atul Sobti (pictured) had led Ranbaxy, a major player in the generic drugs market and headquartered in Gurgaon, for little more than a year. He took the helm after the US Food and Drug Administration accused the company of falsifying safety data. Ranbaxy announced net profits of 3.3 billion rupees (US\$71 million) for the year’s second quarter, down 50% on the previous year but above analysts’ expectations.

Pharma deal: Generic drugs maker Aspen Pharmacare, based in Durban, South Africa, will buy the drugs manufacturing unit of Australian company Sigma Pharmaceuticals for A\$900 million (US\$806 million). Aspen, which is 19% owned by pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline, headquartered in London, and is Africa’s largest drugs manufacturer, wanted to expand its position in the Australian generics market. It announced the deal on 16 August.

Gene-sequencing IPO: Pacific Biosciences, a gene-sequencing technology company in Menlo Park, California, aims to raise US\$200 million in an initial

New Jersey, and MIT, based in Cambridge. A123, meanwhile, says that it has ended a deal with Chrysler to provide batteries for the firm’s electric cars, although it promised a new deal with an unnamed car manufacturer.

Ranbaxy resignation: The chief executive of India’s biggest drug maker, Ranbaxy, resigned unexpectedly last week, citing differences of opinion with parent company Daiichi Sankyo,

THE WEEK AHEAD

19-27 AUGUST
The International Congress of Mathematicians — the discipline’s largest gathering, held once every four years — takes place in Hyderabad, India. The prestigious Fields Medal will be awarded at its opening ceremony.
 www.icm2010.org.in

22-26 AUGUST
The American Chemical Society holds its autumn meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, with the theme of chemistry for combating disease.
 go.nature.com/AD8G6E

22-28 AUGUST
The 28th International Ornithological Congress discusses all things bird-related in Campos do Jordão, São Paulo, Brazil.
 www.acquaviva.com.br/ioc2010/

public offering. In a US Securities and Exchange Commission filing dated 16 August, the company says that it would use the proceeds for further research and development relating to its sequencing technology, which reads off DNA sequences at single-molecule resolution in real time (see *Nature* 465, 145; 2010). It would also use the money to boost marketing, sales and manufacturing of its sequencers, planned for commercial launch later this year.

BUSINESS WATCH

A generation of drugs with the potential to cure hepatitis C is set to flood the market. This month, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and drug behemoth Merck, headquartered in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, both released promising results from late-stage clinical trials of their leading drugs against the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

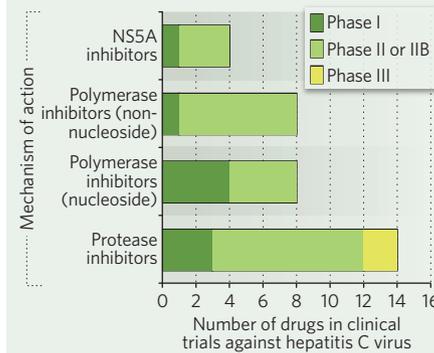
The virus, which infects liver cells and can cause cirrhosis and liver cancer, affects about 3% of the world’s population. Currently, half of the patients with HCV are cured by a course of an immune-boosting protein and a general antiviral, although the treatment can have serious side effects. Merck’s drug boceprevir and

Vertex’s telaprevir both block HCV’s protease enzyme and — combined with the standard treatment — cured 66% and 72% of patients respectively in phase III trials.

If the drugs are approved by mid-2011, as their manufacturers hope, they will take the early lead in an HCV-drug field that could grow to be worth US\$15 billion by 2017, according to Irena Melnikova, a life-sciences analyst at TVM Capital in Boston, Massachusetts. Competitors in a crowded field (see chart) are developing other protease inhibitors, as well as drugs that target HCV’s polymerase enzyme, and its NS5A protein, which is involved in replication and viral assembly. See go.nature.com/rkncZt for more.

PHARMA’S NEXT BLOCKBUSTER?

A new generation of hepatitis C drugs specifically targets the virus.



SOURCE: SAGENT RESEARCH SYSTEMS