

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## POLICY

### UK libel reform

Long-awaited reforms to English and Welsh libel laws were proposed in draft legislation published by the UK government on 15 March. Changes to the existing laws could establish greater legal protection for scientists and journalists wanting to debate scientific or medical issues. The proposals suggest explicit protection for those reporting on academic conferences. A consultation runs until 10 June. See page 409 for more.

### US budget limbo

Researchers in the United States face another anxious wait before finding out the extent of cuts to science agencies' funding in the federal budget for the 2011 fiscal year. On 18 March, President Barack Obama signed a short-term continuing resolution to fund the government until 8 April, avoiding a shutdown. Until then, the Republican-majority House and the Democrat-majority Senate will continue to thrash out their differences on 2011 budget cuts (for details, see *Nature* 471, 144–145; 2011).

## SOUNDBITE

“We’re on the verge of an Arctic ozone hole.”

**Markus Rex of the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Potsdam, Germany.** See [go.nature.com/pkzgs1](http://go.nature.com/pkzgs1) for more on the Arctic’s unprecedented ozone depletion this spring.



REUTERS/R. ORLOWSKI

## Fukushima sparks anti-nuclear protests

Japan’s nuclear crisis has shaken public confidence in the safety of atomic energy, but most governments are reluctant to pull the plug on nuclear plans. Instead they are promising to rethink strategies and undertake safety checks. European Union leaders decided that existing reactors in the region should undergo stress tests, which are voluntary. Facing public protests (pictured), Germany temporarily switched off its seven oldest reactors and put a three-month

moratorium on plans to extend reactor life-spans. Although Britain, Russia, France, the United States and India all announced safety checks of existing plants last week, none is delaying expansion plans. China, however, announced plans to temporarily suspend work on 26 reactors under construction, and to reconsider long-term expansion plans involving at least 50 more reactors. See [go.nature.com/sm6blc](http://go.nature.com/sm6blc) and page 411 for more.

### Elite spared cuts

Research-intensive universities in England will be cushioned from cash cuts to the nation’s higher-education grants. Compared with 2010–11, institutions next year will lose on average 3.7% of their research and teaching grants, which respectively total £1.6 billion (US\$2.6 billion) and £4.3 billion. But provisional allocations released on 17 March show that small, teaching-focused institutions will lose up to 10% in grants, whereas research-intensive universities such as Cambridge are to see budget cuts of less than 1% — and

some, such as Oxford, will see increases. See [go.nature.com/2xgqfj](http://go.nature.com/2xgqfj) for more.

## BUSINESS

### Celera sold

Pioneering genetic sequencing company Celera has been sold to the medical giant Quest Diagnostics for US\$671 million, it announced on 18 March. In 1998, Celera boasted that it would sequence the human genome within three years — and then succeeded. Since then the company, founded by geneticist Craig Venter and based in Alameda, California,

has focused on developing genetic tests for diseases. The deal will give Quest Diagnostics, of Madison, New Jersey, access to Celera’s pipeline of disease biomarkers.

### Solar subsidy cuts

The United Kingdom has signalled its intent to join Spain, Germany, France and Italy in reducing state incentives for solar-power production. In a consultation document published on 18 March, the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change suggested cutting feed-in tariffs — the price that an electricity utility must pay to generators

of solar energy — because too many large-scale projects were being planned. Under the revised system, subsidies for large arrays of photovoltaic panels would be slashed by 50–75% from 1 August.

## RESEARCH

## Arthropod project

A consortium of US and European scientists hopes to sequence the complete genomes of 5,000 species of arthropod within 5 years. The i5K Arthropod Sequencing Initiative will focus on economically important insects, disease vectors, model organisms and representatives from all the evolutionary branches of insects and related species. Currently, fewer than 50 arthropod genomes have been sequenced. The initiative was formally announced last week (G. E. Robinson *et al.* *Science* 331, 1386; 2011), and species can be nominated for sequencing at [www.arthropodgenomes.org/wiki/i5K](http://www.arthropodgenomes.org/wiki/i5K).

## Penguins in peril

Conservationists are warning of an ecological disaster in the south Atlantic after the cargo vessel *MS Oliva* broke up near Nightingale Island on 18 March, spilling heavy crude oil and threatening penguins already classed as endangered. The island



forms part of the Tristan da Cunha group, which is UK territory; tens of thousands of Northern Rockhopper penguins (*Eudyptes moseleyi*) live there. A slick from leaking oil extends 13 kilometres offshore, and oiled penguins (pictured) have been seen on the shores. See [go.nature.com/z11rlp](http://go.nature.com/z11rlp) for more.

## Alone in space

The next large science mission for the European Space Agency will have to make do without funding from NASA, the agency has decided. The 'L-class' mission, to launch around 2020, will be selected in February 2012 from three competitors, and will see its budget capped at €700 million (US\$996 million), about half of what had been hoped for. See page 421 for more.

## Orbiting Mercury

NASA's MESSENGER spacecraft has become the first probe ever to orbit Mercury. The craft slipped into orbit around the Solar System's innermost planet on 18 March,

after a 6.5-year flight that included three earlier flybys of its target. MESSENGER will conduct a comprehensive one-year survey of Mercury, studying surface features as small as 18 metres across, and searching for hints of ice within permanently shadowed craters near the planet's poles. It will also make magnetic-field measurements that could reveal structural details about Mercury's iron core. NASA expects the probe to start beaming imaging data back to Earth from 4 April.

## Crop genetics

An international treaty, whose 127 signatories pledge to share genetic information about food crops, has secured more than US\$10 million in donations for a second round of research grants, aimed at conserving global food security. Grant winners will be announced in May. Best known for its role in enabling the construction of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, the treaty had struggled to gather research funds. The latest donations were announced at a meeting last week in Bali, Indonesia. See [go.nature.com/wyygdg](http://go.nature.com/wyygdg) for more.

## Fire above lab

A major underground laboratory at the bottom of the Soudan Mine in Minnesota was not seriously harmed by a

## COMING UP

### 27–31 MARCH

The American Chemical Society holds its spring meeting in Anaheim, California, focusing on the chemistry of natural resources.

[go.nature.com/egqhue](http://go.nature.com/egqhue)

### 28 MARCH

The Royal Society in London releases a report mapping how science is done around the world, and how these patterns are changing.

[go.nature.com/iv3bqu](http://go.nature.com/iv3bqu)

fire that broke out on 17 March in a lift shaft serving the lab. However, physics experiments there were suspended this week as crews worked to restart ventilation systems and pumps after quenching the fire. Among the high-energy experiments hosted by the University of Minnesota lab is the Cryogenic Dark Matter Search, which looks for signals of dark matter passing through crystals of germanium and silicon. See [go.nature.com/ma2spj](http://go.nature.com/ma2spj) for more and page 433 for a News Feature about dark-matter detectors.

## Clinical-trial access

The European Medicines Agency has started to allow public access to its database of clinical trials. Information on interventional trials that are being carried out in all 27 European Union (EU) member states, as well as in Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, will be searchable in the EU Clinical Trials Register ([go.nature.com/cacwil](http://go.nature.com/cacwil)). As part of transparency measures, the site will gradually publish information from EudraCT, the EU's database of clinical trials dating from May 2004, which is not publicly available at the moment.

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## TREND WATCH

Jumps in the prices of electricity and European carbon permits accompanied the German government's 15 March decision to shut the country's seven oldest nuclear reactors, and to suspend the planned extension of licences to operate other nuclear plants. To compensate for the drop in nuclear energy supply, utilities companies expect to switch to producing electricity from more carbon-intensive gas and coal, thus boosting demand for future allowances to emit carbon dioxide on the Emissions Trading System.

## NUCLEAR CRISIS RATTLES EUROPEAN ENERGY MARKETS

Electricity and carbon-permit prices rose as investors worried that civil nuclear programmes might stall after the scare at Fukushima, Japan.

