

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

German GM crops

The highest court in Germany has upheld a law that makes planters of genetically modified (GM) crops liable for any contamination of their neighbours' non-GM fields. The Federal Constitutional Court said on 24 November that the 2004 (amended in 2008) legislation, which also requires minimum 150-metre buffer zones between GM and conventional crops and a public register for the location of GM plantings, was justified because the long-term consequences of GM technology are still unclear. The law had been first challenged by the state of Saxony-Anhalt.

Patient protection

US President Barack Obama has asked his bioethics commission to review the recent discovery that US government-funded scientists intentionally infected subjects with syphilis in a study in Guatemala in the 1940s (see *Nature* 467, 645; 2010). In a 24 November memorandum, he also asked the commission to launch a panel in January to examine whether current rules, domestically and internationally, adequately protect those taking part in federally funded scientific research from harm.

UK immigration

UK government quotas on immigration, announced in outline last week, may leave young scientists from outside the European Union (EU) unable to secure visas to the country. Overall, 21,700 skilled non-EU migrants will be allowed in annually (down from 28,000 in 2009); most will come in through a points-based visa system that could squeeze out young PhD scientists on typical academic

salaries, according to the advocacy group Campaign for Science and Engineering. Some scientists might be able to enter through the 1,000 places set aside for those of 'exceptional talent' — although qualifications for this route are unclear.

Q-fever delay

A report has found that the Dutch government took too long to respond to an outbreak of Q fever, which since 2007 has killed 14 people and made almost 4,000 ill in the Netherlands. The disease, caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*, can trigger abortions in goats and sheep and cause flu-like symptoms and sometimes pneumonia in humans. The seven-man panel, whose evaluation was released

last week, found that the health and agriculture ministries coordinated their efforts poorly before they ordered a cull of more than 50,000 dairy goats in 2009, which seems to have quashed the disease.

US energy boost

The United States needs to triple its annual federal funding — from US\$5 billion to \$16 billion — for energy 'research, development, demonstration and deployment', and adopt a strategic, coordinated energy policy, a report from the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) recommends. The report, released on 29 November, urges that the government aid coherent planning by

producing, from 2015, a 'Quadrennial Energy Review', modelled on an existing defence review.

Oil-spill budget

Scientists have welcomed a long-awaited peer-reviewed US government report on the short-term fate of the oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico this summer. Released on 23 November, the report supersedes an 'oil budget calculator' published in August, which was not peer reviewed and was criticized for its lack of information about how calculations were carried out, uncertainties in estimates and overly optimistic press presentation. The new report comes to similar conclusions to those of the August report,



D. CHOWDHURY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Nations pledge to double tiger numbers

Thirteen countries that are home to the world's last wild tigers have pledged to try to double the animal's numbers to about 7,000, and to "significantly expand" its habitat by 2022 (the next Chinese year of the tiger). The agreement, at a conference in St Petersburg, Russia, last

week, saw nations including Russia and India put up US\$127 million in new funding and a loan package from the World Bank for some tiger-range countries. One of the challenges will be to prevent poaching and trade in tiger skins (pictured — a seized skin in Kolkata, India).

although oil experts note a paucity of solid data on which to base estimates. See go.nature.com/j3ixm6 for more.

Bisphenol A ban

The European Commission has agreed to ban the common chemical bisphenol A from baby bottles across the European Union by mid-2011. The decision, announced on 25 November, follows similar precautionary bans by France, Denmark, Canada and some US states. Studies in animals suggest that exposure to bisphenol A, a hormone-disrupting plasticizer used in food-can linings and bottles, may affect development and immune responses, and poses cancer risks.

Tuna quotas

Fisheries regulators are showing little mercy to the Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*), which is in danger of being wiped out by commercial fishing. On 27 November at a meeting in Paris, members of the Madrid-based International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which manages tuna fishing, voted for 2011 catch quotas in the Mediterranean Sea to be set at 12,900 tonnes, only slightly lower than this year's 13,500 tonnes. Susan Lieberman, director of international policy for the Pew Environment Group



in Washington DC, says the agreement showed that management of high seas fisheries was "flawed and inadequate".

Polar-bear pad

The US Fish and Wildlife Service has set aside roughly 484,000 square kilometres in Alaska and the surrounding seas as a 'critical habitat' for the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*), more than two years after the species was given a protection status of 'threatened' by the US Endangered Species Act. Almost all of the protected area is sea ice off Alaska's northern and western coasts. Oil and gas companies can still drill in the area, but federal agencies have to ensure that proposed activities don't jeopardize polar bears and their habitat.

BUSINESS

Orphan drugs

European spending on research and development (R&D) of 'orphan' drugs for rare diseases jumped from

€158 million (US\$207 million) in 2000 to nearly €500 million in 2008 — doubling from 1% to 2.2% of total European pharmaceutical R&D spending, a report has found. In that same period, global R&D spending on orphan drugs grew from €305 million to €1.9 billion, or from 1.1% to more than 4% of the global total. The report, released on 29 November, was commissioned by two trade associations based in Brussels: the European Association for Bioindustries and European Biopharmaceutical Enterprises.

PEOPLE

Murder in Iran

Majid Shahriari, an Iranian nuclear physicist, was killed and his wife injured in a bomb attack on 29 November in Tehran. Another nuclear scientist, Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, and his wife, survived an identical simultaneous attack. See page 607 for more.

Scientist threatened

Animal-rights activists mailed razor blades and a 'threatening note' to neuroscientist David Jentsch at the University of California, Los Angeles, in November, the university said last week. Jentsch, who often speaks out about the importance of animal research and maintains a dialogue with some animal-rights groups,

COMING UP

2 DECEMBER

Heads of East African states hold a meeting to formulate a policy on agricultural innovation and food security in response to climate change in the region. go.nature.com/b4gqxb

7 DECEMBER

Commercial space-flight company SpaceX, of Hawthorne, California, is scheduled to make its first attempt to launch a spacecraft into orbit on its Falcon 9 rocket and return the craft to Earth. Such a round-trip has only ever been performed by government agencies.

had his car torched last year. "I will not feel fear in response to your increasingly desperate and puerile attempts to frighten," he wrote in a letter, posted online, to the group who claimed responsibility for sending the package. See go.nature.com/iy9xbq for more.

RESEARCH

Temperature hike

The figure of 0.05–0.13 °C for the world's warming during the past decade has been underestimated by around 0.03 °C, the UK Met Office said on 26 November. Drifting buoys — increasingly used since 2000 — tend to report a cooler temperature relative to ships' measurements, researchers calculated. A corrected trend would come closer to the long-term warming trend seen since the 1970s, of 0.16 °C per decade. It could also make 2010 the world's hottest year; the World Meteorological Organization is expected to pronounce its verdict on 2 December.

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TREND WATCH

A 1.6% jump in doctorates awarded in the United States last year was almost entirely the result of more women gaining science and engineering PhDs — up 4.3% (since 2008) to 13,593 (see chart). Ethnic minorities earning PhDs were up 6.4% from 2008 and 34.3% from 2004, to 4,719. But job prospects for these new doctorate holders are less rosy. In some fields, science and engineering PhDs were slightly less likely to have a postdoc or other job lined up, compared with 2008.

US SCIENCE DOCTORATES HIT RECORD

Female scientists are driving a boom in science and engineering PhDs in the United States.

