

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## POLICY

### Europe HFC ban

The European Parliament has approved a ban on potent greenhouse gases used in some cooling systems, aerosol sprays and synthetic foams. Once in the atmosphere, the warming effect of hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) gases is thousands of times that of carbon dioxide, and emissions of HFCs across Europe have increased by 60% since 1990. The legislation aims to cut use of the gases by 79% over the next 15 years. European Union member states will vote on the new rules in April.

### GM crops detected

Small amounts of genetically modified (GM) crops are increasingly being detected in traded food and feed, says the Rome-based United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). In the first survey of its kind, published on 13 March, the FAO reports that, across 75 of its member countries, regulators identified 198 incidents in which low levels of GM crops were detected in supposedly non-GM crops. Most cases occurred in the latter years of the survey between 2009 and 2012, and involved linseed, rice, maize (corn) and papaya. Once detected, most shipments were destroyed or returned to the country of origin. The FAO attributes the rise to increased global production of GM crops and better detection technology.

### Dangerous research

Animal-rights extremists are increasingly making their attacks personal. A 12 March report by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology says that since 2000, nearly 50% of attacks by extremists have



AZWAR/EPA/CORBIS

## Illegal fires ravage Sumatra

The number of fires raging across the Indonesian island of Sumatra (pictured) last week is the highest in recent years. Using satellite data, the World Resources Institute (WRI) in Washington DC detected 3,101 fires on the island. This exceeds the 2,643 fires detected in the same region in June last year,

when the nation's government declared a state of emergency in response to the worst air pollution ever recorded in southeast Asia. Roughly half of the current fires are on land managed by oil-palm and logging companies, even though using fire to clear land is illegal in Indonesia, a WRI analysis says.

targeted individuals rather than institutions, compared to 9% over 1990–99. Extremists are harassing researchers at home and destroying their property, the report says. It recommends that researchers protect themselves by becoming familiar with local laws and keeping their personal contact information private.

### Undefined illness

The US Institute of Medicine cannot define Gulf War illness, which plagues veterans of the 1990–91 war with symptoms of fatigue, pain, memory loss and gastrointestinal disorders. The diversity of symptoms and the lack of a diagnostic test prevented a single definition, said a report published on 12 March by the institute,

based in Washington DC. The Department of Veterans Affairs had asked for a more specific definition to guide research and care for veterans. The department argues that the condition should not be treated primarily as a mental illness.

### Swiss grants crisis

The Swiss government has stepped in to offer substitute grants in the wake of a move that bars researchers in the country from applying to the European Research Council (ERC). Switzerland lost its status as an associate partner in the European Union's €80-billion (US\$110-billion) Horizon 2020 funding programme after it imposed curbs on immigration (see *Nature*

506, 277; 2014). The change hit hundreds of would-be ERC applicants based in the country. The Swiss National Science Foundation in Bern is now offering a number of replacement grants of comparable size to those offered by the ERC. See [go.nature.com/bf1dcw](http://go.nature.com/bf1dcw) for more.

### Climate consensus

The American Association for the Advancement of Science issued a report on 18 March called *What We Know*, summarizing the science behind climate change (see [go.nature.com/ewy8cd](http://go.nature.com/ewy8cd)). It follows an overview of climate science by the UK Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences that was

AMY GEORGE/USGS launched on 27 February (see [go.nature.com/puvn4v](http://go.nature.com/puvn4v)). The documents come ahead of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report focusing on the impacts of climate change, which will be released at the end of March.

## RESEARCH

**Inflation evidence**

A telescope at the South Pole has revealed strong evidence that the Universe went through a period of rapid inflation just after the Big Bang. To great excitement, a collaboration led by researchers at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, announced that the telescope had spotted the influence of gravitational waves (ripples in space that inflation would have caused) on the cosmic microwave background, the radiation released after the Big Bang. See page 281 and [go.nature.com/lruz8e](http://go.nature.com/lruz8e) for more.

**Carp invasion**

Asian carp that have run amok in the rivers of the midwestern United States are spawning farther north in the Mississippi River than previously recorded, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said on 11 March. USGS scientists found embryos (pictured) of bigheaded carp about to hatch in the river running through



Lynxville, Wisconsin. The fish were originally imported from southeast Asia to the southern United States for aquaculture and to help clean ponds in wastewater-treatment facilities. But they escaped and bred, and are now causing environmental and economic damage.

**Research apology**

The Japanese research institute that is home to several authors of two controversial stem-cell papers has apologized for errors in the research. On 14 March, the RIKEN institute in Tokyo announced the preliminary findings of an investigation into work led by Haruko Obokata that describes a method for reprogramming differentiated mouse cells into a pluripotent embryonic-like state by stressing them. The papers, published in *Nature*, were criticized for using several duplicated images and because their results have not been reproduced. See page 283 for more.

## PEOPLE

**Córdova confirmed**

The US Senate confirmed astrophysicist France Córdova as head of the National Science Foundation (NSF) on 12 March. The foundation funds basic non-medical research with a budget of US\$7.2 billion; Córdova's confirmation comes just over a year after former director Subra Suresh resigned mid-term. Córdova was most recently chairwoman of the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents and a member of the National Science Board, the panel that oversees the NSF. See page 285 for more.

**Integrity red tape**

The departing director of the US Office of Research Integrity (ORI), David Wright, has accused the Department of Health and Human Services — in which the ORI sits — of “remarkably dysfunctional” bureaucracy in a resignation letter. Wright, who is leaving the directorship on 27 March after two years in charge, described what he said was the low priority afforded his office by higher management; for example, the ORI's head-of-education post has been unfilled for 16 months. The letter was published online by *Science* on 12 March. Wright

## COMING UP

**25–28 MARCH**  
Marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of Norman Borlaug, who saved millions from starvation by developing higher-yielding crops, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico is holding a conference to discuss the state of research on wheat.  
[go.nature.com/hrne9g](http://go.nature.com/hrne9g)

**26–28 MARCH**  
Physicists debate a suitable landing site for the ExoMars rover at a meeting at the European Space Agency's European Space Astronomy Centre near Madrid. The mission plans to land a rover on the red planet in 2018.  
[go.nature.com/i5n5r2](http://go.nature.com/i5n5r2)

said that bureaucracy “sucks away time and resources that we might better use to meet our mission”. See page 275 for more.

## BUSINESS

**BP drilling back on**

Energy giant BP will once more be allowed to bid for US leases to drill for oil and gas offshore, after the company reached an agreement with the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on 13 March. It had been barred from new federal contracts in November 2012, two years after its Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico was involved in a massive oil spill. The agreement comes with conditions — for example, BP must improve its practices and an EPA-approved auditor will review them annually.

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## TREND WATCH

International patent applications grew 5.1% to more than 200,000 last year, according to the World Intellectual Property Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. The United States exceeded its previous record, set before the financial crisis, and China saw the largest growth with a 16% surge. The University of California (46% rise to 398 applications) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge (49% rise to 217) were the top-filing educational institutions.

**CHINA'S PATENTS SURGE**

China overtook Germany in 2013 to reach third place in international patent filings.

